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Crossing the Rubicon: Soviet Plans for Offensive War in 1940-1941

SOME SIXTY YEARS after the event, the outbreak of the war between Nazi Germany and Soviet Russia remains controversial. In particular, historians continue to argue about the objectives of Joseph Stalin's foreign policy in 1939-41, and more narrowly, the intentions of the Red Army. Both sensational and scholarly works have been published. Right-wing German historians have argued for some time – as did Adolf Hitler himself on the very day of the invasion, 22 June 1941 – that Operation *Barbarossa* forestalled an imminent Red Army attack and that the German onslaught was a 'preventative' invasion.¹ A more important catalyst for debate outside Germany was the same thesis in the book *Icebreaker (Ledokol)*, written by the Russian émigré V. B. Rezun, under the pseudonym Viktor Suvorov.² Rezun-Suvorov had two related themes: that Stalin planned to use Hitler and Hitler's wars as an 'icebreaker' against the frozen sea of European capitalism, and that as part of this grand design Stalin planned to launch the Red Army against the Germans in July 1941.

Broadly speaking, two historical interpretations have emerged concerning this subject. One continues to accept the long-held view that Moscow's diplomacy and strategy in 1939-41 was defensive, pragmatic, and essentially passive in the face of the German danger. The other argues that there were significant offensive and active elements – military, diplomatic, or even ideological – in Russian policy at this time. This second interpretation cannot reasonably be called 'Suvorovite' as few of those who hold to it accept all Rezun-Suvorov's arguments and evidence; Russian historians are also troubled by his status as a 'defector' from Soviet military intelligence. One Western author has recently suggested that the terms 'defensist' and 'offensist' might be used to describe the two interpretations, but it is probably safest to fall back on the terms 'traditionalist' and 'revisionist'.³ It is noteworthy,

¹ For the text of Hitler's address, 22 June 1941, 'Soldaten der Ostfront!', see: 'Unternehmen Barbarossa'. *Der deutsche Überfall auf die Sowjetunion 1941. Berichte, Analysen, Dokumente*, ed. G. Ueberschär and W. Wette (Paderborn, 1984), pp. 319-23.

² V. Suvorov, *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (London, 1990).

³ A. L. Weeks, *Stalin's Other War: Soviet Grand Strategy, 1939-41* (Lanham, 2002), pp. 2-3. Weeks argues in favour of the 'offensist' school. The term 'revisionist' is used by both David Glantz and Gabriel Gorodetsky (D. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus: The Red Army on the Eve of the World War*

however, that here these interpretations are the exact opposite of traditionalist and revisionist in debates about the post-war period. In any event, the revisionists on the pre-war period, going beyond Rezun-Suvorov, are a broad church in terms of opinions, interests, sources, and professional competence. There are participants in the German debate such as Joachim Hoffmann, Ernst Topitsch, and Walter Post.¹ There are other Western historians who stress the role of ideology in Stalinist foreign policy, such as R. C. Raack and Silvio Pons, while Cynthia Roberts has written about the offensive features of Red Army planning.² And most interestingly, there are well-informed post-Soviet historians such as P. N. Bobylev, M. I. Mel'tiukhov, V. D. Danilov, and V. A. Nevezhin.³

The traditionalists (or neo-traditionalists) are more numerous, and their work would take in practically everything serious written before 1985. In modern Russia, they include the older generation of historians, especially those defending the honour of the army: examples are L. A. Bezymenskii, M. A. Gareev, Iu. A. Gor'kov, and O. V. Vishlev.⁴ In the West, two of the foremost authorities on the period, Gabriel Gorodetsky and David Glantz, have gone to the trouble of producing book-length rebuttals to Rezun-Suvorov. The Israeli historian Gorodetsky published *Mif 'Ledokola'* [The 'Icebreaker' Myth] in 1995. His magisterial *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* followed three years later and had a broader scope and an outstanding archival basis, but it also has its roots in the 'Icebreaker' controversy. Wholly rejecting Rezun-Suvorov, Gorodetsky depicted Soviet

(Lawrence, 2000), p. 2; G. Gorodetskii, "'Ledokol'? Stalin i put' k voine', in *Voina i politika 1939-41*, ed. A. O. Chubarian (Moscow, 1999), p. 250.

¹ E. Topitsch, *Stalins Krieg. Die sowjetische Langzeitstrategie gegen den Westen als rationale Machtpolitik* (Munich, 1985); W. Post, *Unternehmen Barbarossa. Deutsche und sowjetische Angriffspläne 1940/41* (Hamburg, 1995); J. Hoffmann, *Stalin's War of Extermination, 1941-5: Planning, Realization, and Documentation* (n.p., 2001) (rev. ed. of *Stalins Vernichtungskrieg 1941-5* [Munich, 1995]). The German historiographical debate is discussed in *Der deutsche Angriff auf die Sowjetunion 1941: Die Kontroverse um die Präventivkriegsthese*, ed. G. R. Ueberschär and L. A. Bezymesnkij (Darmstadt, 1998), pp. 48-74, and *Präventivkrieg? Der deutsche Angriff auf die Sowjetunion*, ed. B. Pietrow-Ennker (Frankfurt, 2000).

² R. C. Raack, *Stalin's Drive to the West, 1938-45: The Origins of the Cold War* (Cambridge, 1995); S. Pons, *Stalin and the Inevitable War, 1936-41* (London, 2002); C. A. Roberts, 'Planning for War: The Red Army and the Catastrophe of 1941', *Europe-Asia Studies*, xlviii (1995), 1293-326, and 'Oshibki Stalina i Krasnoi Armii nakanune voiny', in *Voina i politika*, ed. Chubarian, pp. 226-43.

³ V. D. Danilov, 'Stalinskaia strategii nachala voiny: Plany i realnost', *Otechestvennaia istoriia* (1995, no. 3), pp. 33-44; V. A. Nevezhin, *Sindrom nastupatel'noi voiny* (Moscow, 1997); M. I. Mel'tiukhov, *Upushchenyi shans Stalina: Sovetskii soiuз i bor'ba za Evropu: 1939-1941 (dokumenty, fakty, suzhdeniia)* (Moscow, 2000); P. N. Bobylev, 'Tochku v diskussii stavit' rano: K voprosu o planirovanii v General'nom shtabe RKKA vozmozhnoi voiny s Germaniei v 1940-1941 godakh', *Otechestvennaia istoriia* (2000, no. 1), pp. 41-63.

⁴ Iu. A. Gor'kov, 'Gotovil li Stalin uprezhdaushchii udar protiv Gitlera v 1941 g.', *N[ovaia i] n[oveishaia] i[storiia]* (1993, no. 3), pp. 29-45; M. A. Gareev, *Neodnoznachnye stranitsy voiny* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 78-100; O. V. Vishlev, *Nakanune 22 iunია 1941 goda* (Moscow, 2001); L. Bezymenskii, *Gitler i Stalin pered skhvatkoi* (Moscow, 2002). For discussions among Russian historians, see 'S zasedeniia redkollegii', *Otechestvennaia istoriia* (1994, nos. 4-5), pp. 277-83, and M. Iu. Miagkov, 'Predvoennye operativnye plany SSSR (zasedeniia Assotsiatsii istorikov vtoroi mirovoi voiny [Dec. 1997])', in *Voina i politika*, ed. Chubarian, pp. 489-93.

policy as 'essentially one of level-headed *Realpolitik*'; he portrayed a Stalin who, from an acute sense of military weakness, was eager to appease Hitler and who suffered from the 'grand delusion' that the German dictator would negotiate with him. Glantz, the leading living Western historian of the Soviet participation in the Second World War, produced *Stumbling Colossus* which also attempted to demolish Rezun-Suvorov. There could, for Glantz, be no thought of the Red Army being used offensively; the 'Soviet political and military leadership ... understood that the Soviet military colossus was severely flawed'.¹

The argument of the present article is certainly not that the German action was a preventative attack. Hitler and his high command were remarkably ignorant of Soviet preparations, and their plans for aggressive war against Russia, dating back to July 1940, are well documented. This is also not a defence of the polemics of Rezun-Suvorov. What I am concerned with is how the Soviet high command planned to fight a general war in 1940-1, the extent to which these plans were supported by Stalin and the Soviet political leadership, and the way such plans relate to the traditionalist-revisionist debate. In particular, the aim is to put into context a document that is now fairly well known but still not well understood. It was drafted by the Red Army leadership in mid-May 1941, and proposed 'a sudden blow against the enemy, both from the air and on land'. Under this proposed war plan, a Soviet force of 152 divisions and 3,000-4,000 aircraft was to launch a surprise attack against the Germans in southern Poland. The first half of this article will outline Red Army war planning from 1938 to May 1941; the second half will discuss Stalin's involvement in this process in the early summer of 1941.

* * * * *

In May 1940, after the problematic performance of the Red Army in the Soviet-Finnish 'Winter War', Marshal S. K. Timoshenko replaced Marshal K. E. Voroshilov as people's commissar [minister] of defence. In the extraordinary document which followed the handover of the people's commissariat, it was noted that when Timoshenko took over 'there was no operational war plan [*operativnyi plan voiny*] and that neither general nor partial operational plans existed or were under development'.² In truth, planning had been overtaken by grand events in Poland and France, by Soviet annexations in the western borderlands, by the Soviet-Finnish War, and by the growth and redeployment of the Red Army. However, a war plan had been produced in March

¹ G. Gorodetskii, *Mif 'Ledokola': Nakanune voiny* (Moscow, 1995); G. Gorodetsky, *Grand Delusion: Stalin and the German Invasion of Russia* (New Haven, 1998), p. 7; Glantz, *Colossus*, pp. 1-8, 259. John Erickson was deeply critical of Rezun-Suvorov and supportive of Gorodetsky in one of his last articles, 'Barbarossa June 1941: Who Attacked Whom?', *History Today*, li (2001), 11-21.

² Timoshenko report [*Akt o prieme NKO*], 7 Dec. 1940 [*sic*], 1941 *god*, ed. V. P. Naumov et al. (Moscow, 1998), ii. 623. Subsequently abbreviated to 1941 *god*. This extraordinary collection of 686 documents relating to the outbreak of the war was compiled with the support of nine Russian archives.

1938 by Army Commander 1st Class B. M. Shaposhnikov, then chief of the general staff, and approved in that November by the main military council. The plan was based on a very different geographical and diplomatic situation from 1940-1, with the old borders and an assumed German-Polish alliance. Nevertheless, the overall concept of 1938 was one which would continue in all the later war plans: a Red Army offensive (or counter-offensive) either north or south of the Poles'ia (the Pripjat' marshes) and 'active defence' in the other sector. Basing itself on prepared positions, a covering force would hold the first wave of an attacking enemy and then, after a mass mobilization, the Soviet forces would carry the war into the enemy's territory.¹

In August 1940, immediately after the annexation of the Baltic states, Timoshenko and Shaposhnikov submitted to Stalin and V. M. Molotov, the Soviet prime minister, a draft war plan entitled 'Considerations [*Soobrazheniia*] Regarding the Basis of the Strategic Deployment of the Armed Forces of the USSR in the West and in the East in 1940 and 1941'. The final writing up of the plan was the work of Major General A. M. Vasilevskii, who that April had become deputy chief of the operations directorate of the general staff. (A great career lay ahead of Vasilevskii as wartime chief of the general staff and Stalin's post-war minister of defence.) There was only one copy of the document. As before, this plan gave the Red Army an offensive mission. This would be in the northern half of the front (north of the Poles'ia), where it was also assumed an initial German attack would be concentrated: '*The basic task of our forces is to inflict defeat on the German forces concentrated in East Prussia and the Warsaw area.*'² The plan was not approved by the political leadership, and in any event, on 15 August, Shaposhnikov was replaced as chief of the general staff by General of the Army, K. A. Meretskov. More important was a revised war plan first submitted in September 1940 by Timoshenko and Meretskov, which had the same title and structure as its predecessor and was again written up by Vasilevskii. As with the 1938 and August 1940 plans, it included northern and southern variants for operations in the West, but after a discussion with Stalin on 5 October, Timoshenko and Meretskov proposed that the southern variant was to be the 'main blow'. The proposal was accepted in the name of the politburo on 14 October.³

¹ Shaposhnikov to Voroshilov, 24 March 1938, *1941 god*, ii, 557-71; M. V. Zakharov, *General'nyi Shtab v predvoennye gody* (Moscow, 1989), pp. 125-33.

² Considerations regarding the basis of strategic deployment, c.19 Aug. 1940 [subsequently abbreviated to Strategic Deployment Plan, c.19 Aug. 1940], *1941 god*, i, 181-93.

³ Considerations regarding the basis of strategic deployment, 18 Sept. 1940 [subsequently cited as Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940], *1941 god*, i, 236-53; Timoshenko and Meretskov, memo to Stalin and Molotov, no earlier than 5 Oct. 1940, *ibid.*, p. 289; D. Volkogonov, *Triumf i tragediia: Politicheskii portret I. V. Stalina* (Moscow, 1989), *kn. II, chast' 1*, pp. 134-5. My assumption that the Timoshenko/Zhukov memo was the document accepted on 14 October is based on the fact that Volkogonov and the editors of *1941 god* cite the same archive reference: TsAMO f. 16, op. 2951, d. 242, ll. 84-90.

The August and September 1940 war plans, and the October politburo decision, have been discussed by historians, including such well-informed specialists on the Red Army as Roberts and Glantz. The change of the main concentration of the Red Army from Belorussia (north of the Poles'ia) to the Ukraine (south of the Poles'ia) has been stressed. However, these historians have considered the plans mainly in terms of defence and in terms of the actual course of the war after 22 June. This redeployment would have disastrous consequences, when the heavier German blow came in Belorussia and, in a few weeks, destroyed General D. G. Pavlov's Western Army Group (in Russian, *Front*) there. Glantz's map of the 'October 1940 strategic plan' simply has arrows marking German advances hundreds of miles *east* into Russia. Roberts does give weight to the offensive aspects of the September plan but she also bases the decision to concentrate on the south mainly on defensive considerations.¹ This discussion, however, misses the point about the choice made in October 1940 concerning the September war plan. The Kremlin decision was not about whether war, after its first weeks, would involve the Red Army in *defensive* operations in either Belorussia or the Ukraine. It was about whether such fighting would involve the Red Army in *offensive* operations against the Germans either north or south of Brest-Litovsk, that is to say either attacking (a) into East Prussia and northern Poland or (b) into southern Poland.

From the point of view of a Soviet *defender*, the northern axis, with an attacker moving from East Prussia and northern Poland into Belorussia, was the greater threat to Moscow. Lines of communication behind the invader's border were better, allowing him to concentrate his forces faster; within the Soviet Union, there were better rail and road routes for the invader to exploit. The northern sector was, in fact, where the Germans actually chose to mount their main attack in June 1941. If the Red Army was to be a passive buffer against such an attack, then Belorussia was the place to concentrate it.

From the point of view of a Soviet *attacker*, however, deployment in Belorussia was less satisfactory. A northern attack would be against East Prussia and northern Poland, and the former region presented special difficulties, as was noted in the September plan:

1. The strong resistance, with the [inevitable] introduction of significant [German] reinforcements ...
2. The difficult natural conditions of East Prussia, which present extreme difficulties in the conduct of offensive operations.
3. The exceptionally well-prepared nature of this theatre for defence, especially the fortifications and [dense] road network.

¹ Roberts, 'Planning', pp. 1316-17; Glantz, *Colossus*, pp. 92-5. For a different, and in my view more satisfactory, perspective, see the map in Mel'tiukhov, *Shans*, between pp. 256 and 257, where the arrows actually move west.

In conclusion there is a danger that the struggle on this front would lead to long-drawn out battles which would tie down our main forces and not give the necessary rapid result, which in turn would make unavoidable and more rapid the entry of the Balkan states into the war against us.

These basic points would be made again in the March 1941 version of the plan after the southern variant had definitively been adopted.¹ Although it was not stated in the September 1940 document, Russian armies had encountered great difficulties in the lakes and forests of East Prussia in 1914-15, at Tannenberg and afterwards. The frustrating experience of trying to break through the prepared defences of the Mannerheim Line in 1939-40 was another historical parallel that cannot have been lost on the Soviet planners; Timoshenko and Meretskov were both veterans of the Finnish campaign. If not taken, East Prussia would be a constant threat hanging over any Red Army advance into northern Poland.

In contrast, a Red Army attack out of the Ukraine would move into southern Poland, a much softer objective than East Prussia in terms of terrain and prepared defences. Such an attack offered the prospect of outflanking and encircling from the south the German forces concentrated in central Poland. More than the northern variant, it also had a plausible strategic objective: the Germans' link with their resource base in the Balkans. The approved southern variant of the September war plan envisaged the main forces of the Red Army being deployed 'to the south of Brest-Litovsk in order, by means of powerful blows in the directions of Lublin and Kraków [in southern Poland] and further to Breslau [in Silesia, now Wrocław], to cut Germany off from the Balkan countries in the very first stage of the war, to deprive it of its most important economic bases, and decisively to influence the Balkan countries in the question of their participation in the war'.² Until just after 22 June 1941, this was to remain the basic operation planned for the Red Army. Lublin was about fifty-five miles west of the new Soviet border on the Bug River. Kraków was 125 miles west of border, and Breslau 150 miles west of Kraków. As for the Balkan countries, Romania, Hungary, and Bulgaria were at this time slipping more and more into the German orbit, but they had still not signed the Tripartite Pact. Yugoslavia could be seen as a neutral state with considerable military potential.

The September 1940 plan, like its predecessor and successors, was based on a greatly exaggerated estimate of German strength. A poor knowledge of the order of battle of the *Wehrmacht* was to be a basic fault of Red Army intelligence and planning right up to June 1941. In the September 1940 plan, *current* total German army strength was

1 Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, 1941 god, i. 245; Refined Plan of Strategic Deployment, 11 March 1941 [subsequently abbreviated to Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941], *V[oennno-i]storicheskii Zh[urnal]* (1992, no. 2), p. 22.

2 Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, 1941 god, i. 241.

estimated to be 'up to' 243 divisions; of these, Red Army intelligence placed 'up to' 94 on the Soviet border, an assessment which, if accurate, would have implied a great build-up since mid-July 1940. Then, the estimate had been only thirteen divisions in East Prussia and 'up to' twenty-eight in Poland. The Soviet plan was based on a war to be fought some time in the future (although not necessarily after the end of the German war with Britain), when the Germans had been able greatly to increase their strength in the East to 173 out of 243 divisions. In reality, even in December 1940, the German army had a total of only 140 combat-ready divisions, of which thirty-six were facing Russia (including two in Romania). (The Germans also had twenty-six army divisions in the process of formation and eighteen 'on leave' – *beurlaubt*.) Soviet estimates of *Luftwaffe* strength were even less accurate; in September, this was put at 14,200–15,000 aircraft (including 2,800–3,300 trainers), and both the August and September plans had anticipated that Germany would concentrate 12,000 aircraft in the East. In mid-August 1940, the *Luftwaffe* had only a total of 3,157 serviceable aircraft in front-line units (including 226 transports), roughly a quarter of the Soviet estimate.¹

Both Roberts and Glantz cite an extended verbatim comment by Stalin on 5 October 1940 about the September plan, in which the dictator expressed fear of a German invasion of the Ukraine. Their source is only an undocumented passage in D. A. Volkogonov's biography of Stalin.² This is not convincing proof that the choice of the southern option was really based on fear of a German invasion of the Ukraine. The September 1940 plan had assumed that the main German attack would be against Lithuania and Belorussia, although the planners suggested that there might be a secondary attack against the western Ukraine. The enemy was expected to concentrate ten panzer divisions and 123 infantry divisions from Siedlce north, and five panzer divisions and fifty infantry divisions south of Siedlce. (Siedlce, a town between Brest and Warsaw, divided the front into two approximately equal halves.) Timoshenko and Meretskov's proposal in October 1940 to concentrate the Red Army in the south would be drafted *after* the supposed 5 October conversation with Stalin cited by Volkogonov; in light of this, it is noteworthy that the proposal does not refer to any specific threat to the Ukraine. In fact, the proposal follows

¹ Report by 5th Administration to Timoshenko, 20 July 1940, 1941 *god*, i. 122; Strategic Deployment Plan, c.19 Aug. 1940, *ibid.*, p. 181; Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, *ibid.*, p. 237; B. Müller-Hillebrand, *Das Heer, 1933–45: Entwicklung des organisatorischen Aufbaues* (Darmstadt, 1956), ii. 110; A. Price, *The Luftwaffe Data Book* (London, 1997), p. 30. In light of all this, Roberts's suggestion that the Red Army leaders 'underestimated the military potential of Germany' is incorrect, at least in quantitative terms ('Oshibki', p. 228). She argues, somewhat paradoxically, that the Red Army had detailed maps of *Wehrmacht* forces facing the Soviet border (*ibid.*, p. 229). In reality, the Red Army had a quite accurate 'division count' of the German army in the east; its key intelligence failure was that it greatly exaggerated the number of German divisions that were *not* facing Russia.

² Roberts, 'Planning', p. 1317; Roberts, 'Oshibki', pp. 237–8; Glantz, *Colossus*, p. 93; Volkogonov, *Triumph i tragediia*, kn. II, *chast'* 1, p. 133.

exactly the wording of the original September plan and is couched in entirely *offensive* terms: 'In the West, the basic grouping is to be in the Southwestern Front in order, by means of powerful blows in the directions of Lublin and Kraków and further to Breslau, to cut Germany off from the Balkan countries in the very first stage of the war, to deprive it of its most important economic bases, and decisively to influence the Balkan countries in the question of their participation in the war.'¹ Both Glantz and Roberts speculate about Stalin's perception of the need for the 'defence' of the Ukraine being partly based on his experience as a military commissar there during the civil war. Equally speculatively, a quite different 'historical' line of thought could be considered: in 1920, Stalin was commissar of an *earlier* Southwestern Army Group that mounted an unsuccessful *offensive* into Poland, which paralleled M. N. Tukhachevskii's Western Army Group drive on Warsaw.²

The Soviet plan of 1940 involved the deployment of 191 Red Army divisions and 159 aviation regiments in the West (there were about forty aircraft in a regiment). Three Army Groups were to be created. The Northwestern and Western Army Groups, based on the Baltic and Western Military Districts (hereafter MDs), and comprising five field armies, would hold off any German attack in the northern sector of the front. Meanwhile, to the south, the main Soviet offensive blow was to be delivered by seven field armies. Six of these armies were to come from Southwestern Army Group (based on the Kiev MD, commanded at this time by General of the Army G. K. Zhukov); one army was to come from the neighbouring Western Army Group. Southwestern Army Group included a 'Cavalry-Mechanized Army' (*Konno-mekhanizirovannaia armiia*) with four tank, two motorized, and two cavalry divisions concentrated at L'vov in the western Ukraine. An additional mechanized corps with two tank divisions and a motorized division was to concentrate behind it at Tarnopol'.³

The strategic concept was tested at the general staff war games held in early January 1941. When originally organized, there was only one game, concentrating on the north-west (Lithuania and East Prussia). Following the decision of the politburo on 14 October to shift the proposed Red Army attack to the south, a second game was added to replicate operations by Southwestern Army Group. These games were based on the assumption that war had been initiated by a hostile power (the 'Westerners') and not by the Soviet Union. That said, there was no actual gaming of the first, defensive, stage of war (the stage which would turn out to be so crucial after 22 June). The games took in

¹ Timoshenko and Meretskov, memo to Stalin and Molotov, no earlier than 5 Oct. 1940, *1941 god*, i. 289. Cf. the text in Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, *ibid.*, i. 238.

² Roberts, 'Planning', p. 1317, Roberts, 'Oshibki', pp. 237-8; Glantz, *Colossus*, p. 93. Still useful as a summary of the 1920 episode is A. Seaton, *Stalin as Warlord* (London, 1977), pp. 65-77.

³ Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, *1941 god*, i. 241-4.

developments that might occur *after* the first few weeks of the war, after the enemy, the 'Westerners', had penetrated some distance into Soviet territory and the army of the 'Easterners' (that is, the Red Army) had completed its mobilization. The primary declared aim of the second game was 'to study and master the bases of modern offensive operations of an army group and an army'. It was also 'to achieve an understanding and a unity of opinion on the conduct of modern offensive operations with the massive use of artillery, tank formations, and the air force'. This game was held from 8 to 11 January. Before the 'end of play', the 'Easterner' (Soviet) counter-offensive, was able to destroy twenty enemy infantry divisions and advance at least one flank 55-110 miles into Poland. The commander of the victorious 'Easterner' Southwestern Army Group was Zhukov, in a post which corresponded to his actual position up to January 1941 (commander of the Kiev MD and putative commander of the army group). P. N. Bobylev has convincingly made the case that these games were closely related to the war plans of the general staff, and the same point was made in recollections of Marshal Vasilevskii.¹

Gorodetsky has argued in *Grand Delusion* that the outcome of the January 1941 war games showed Stalin the difficulty of offensive operations or even of large-scale mobile defensive operations; the games fall within a section of the book entitled 'The Bankruptcy of the Military'. Gorodetsky notes that the war-game umpires were critical of how the large forces were handled, and concludes that 'in view of this harsh judgement Stalin could have few hopes of conducting a military adventure. The most that could be achieved was that the basic deficiencies of the defence ... could be rectified before the Germans moved on to the offensive.' While in hindsight this judgement is entirely correct, there is little evidence that Stalin or the Red Army high command shared it in the spring of 1941. Gorodetsky's account is based on Marshal M. V. Zakharov's memoirs, which were concerned with only the first game. In fact, while some aspects of the war games were indeed judged by the Red Army leaders to be problematical, the overall outcome did not discourage Stalin or the planners: immediately after the games, the officer who had commanded the 'Easterner' drive into Poland in the second game received a remarkable promotion – on 14 January 1941, Zhukov replaced Meretskov as chief of the general staff.²

It is difficult to see Zhukov's appointment as anything other than

¹ *Nakanune voiny: Materialy soveshcheniia vysshego rukovodiashchego sostava RKKA 23-31 dekabria 1940 g.* ed. V. A. Zolotarev et al. (Moscow, 1993), *R[usskii] a[rkhiv]/V[elikaia] O[techestvennaia]*, xii (i[i]), 388-90; Zakharov, *General'nyi shtab*, pp. 239-50; P. N. Bobylev, 'Repetitsiia katastrofy', *VIZh* (1993, nos. 6, 7, 8); P. N. Bobylev, 'K kakoi voine gotovils'ia General'nyi shtab RKKA v 1941 godu?', *VIZh* (1995, no. 5), pp. 8-10; A. M. Vasilevskii, 'Nakanune 22 iunია 1941 g.', *NNI* (1992, no. 6), p. 9.

² *Delusion*, pp. 124-30 (cf. Gorodetskii, *Mif*, pp. 137ff.); Zakharov, *General'nyi shtab*, p. 247; politburo decree, 14 Jan. 1941, *1941 god*, i. 537. Roberts also does not see the war games revealing any weakness to an over-confident Red Army leadership; she does not, however, make a direct link between the war plans and the war games (Roberts, 'Planning', p. 1313).

Stalin's endorsement of the offensive orientation of the Red Army. Zhukov was a cavalryman and a prime exponent of offensive warfare. He had been the designated wartime commander of a key mobile force in the Belorussian MD in 1939, the Cavalry-Mechanized Group (*Konno-mekhanizirovannaiia gruppa*), and an officer whose career was 'made' by his triumphant corps-level offensive at Khalkin Gol in the late summer of 1939, a response to a Japanese probe into eastern Mongolia. As commander of the Kiev MD since June 1940, Zhukov had become familiar with the forces that would carry out the thrust into southern Poland. He had given the keynote address on offensive warfare at the December 1940 high command conference, where he cited continuities from the early days of the Red Army: 'Even in 1921, M. V. Frunze ... wrote that it is necessary to develop our army in the spirit of the greatest activity, preparing it for completing the tasks of the revolution by energetic offensive operations, carried out decisively and daringly.'¹

As Zhukov took up his post, the Red Army general staff was putting the finishing touches to a different kind of plan: this was not about operational deployment but about general mobilization. The plan, sent to Stalin and Molotov in mid-February 1941 and evidently approved by them, was called MP-41 (*Mobilizatsionnyi plan na 1941 god*). The organization-mobilization directorate of the general staff had been working on MP-41 since August-September 1940, and it replaced the previous mobilization plan of November 1937. The new plan outlined the wartime strength of the Red Army and the men, horses, and equipment that would be required to achieve that: there were to be 8,700,000 soldiers in the equivalent of just over 300 fully-equipped divisions. This total would include no fewer than sixty tank divisions and thirty motorized divisions, which were to be organized into thirty three-division mechanized corps; the Red Army air force was to have 333 aviation regiments (13,000-14,000 aircraft).²

MP-41 was symptomatic of grave weakness in the Soviet military system, and showed a lack of coherent and realistic planning. Taking the most critical view of the Red Army leaders, the plan was designed to please their political masters, but also to secure for the military the largest share of national resources. More charitably, the plan was a function of a situation where none of the generals had the authority (or experience) to argue that particular objectives were unrealistic. These objectives were founded more on the overly optimistic long-term targets of the defence industry than on what would be required – or even what could practically be mobilized – in the immediate future. The plan was drafted in terms of equipment whose procurement was

¹ Zhukov address, 25 Dec. 1940, *RA/VO*, i. 151.

² Zhukov and Timoshenko memo to Stalin and Molotov, c.12 Feb. 1941, *1941 god*, i. 607-40; Draft Sovnarkom decree, 12 Feb. 1941, *ibid.*, pp. 641-50; Zakharov, *General'nyi shtab*, pp. 226-30.

planned up to 1 January 1942. The number of heavy and medium tanks, for example, was to rise from 861 on 1 January 1941 to 4,261 by 1 January 1942. But even in the whole course of 1941 (or even of 1942 and 1943), insufficient vehicles would be produced to equip sixty tank divisions and thirty motorized divisions. The most striking problem concerned a key weapon, the medium tank. MP-41 projected that on 1 January 1942, even with optimum production, there would be a shortfall of about 75 percent of vehicles: 12,843 medium tanks were required, but only 3,062 were projected to be available. For sixty tank divisions, the medium-tank requirement alone was 12,600 vehicles (almost all the new T-34 type). Each tank division had an establishment strength of 63 heavy tanks, 210 medium tanks, and 102 light tanks. (Some of the shortfall of medium tanks was temporarily to be covered by the use of 7,218 light tanks.)¹ The aircraft figures were also unrealistic in terms of 1941 production.

MP-41 also demonstrated fundamental miscalculations about what war would be like and how likely it was in the very near future. The Soviet forces were to be armed with offensive weapons, especially tanks and aircraft: only one scenario was envisaged – the concentration of the largest possible ground and air strength at the start of military operations – and there was no provision for second and third echelons in a prolonged war.² The nature of the plan implied that war would come when the Soviet leadership willed it.

This approach and these grandiose targets were not dreamt up by the organization-mobilization directorate, by the general staff as a whole, or even by the people's commissariat of defence. They involved core issues of economic production and diplomatic calculation, and they must have related to a general policy view held at the highest level. The details of this process are not yet fully clear, but they would have involved the Red Army's main military council, the defence committee (*Komitet oborony*) of Sovnarkom, the politburo, and ultimately Stalin himself. In truth, MP-41 displayed the characteristics of the Stalinist system of the 1930s, with its exhortative planning, its 'gigantomania', and its wishful thinking. Extraordinarily, but perhaps symptomatically, Stalin in a semi-secret speech of 5 May 1941 to military academy graduates 'revealed' the MP-41 figures to be *current*: 'Now we have 300 divisions in [*v sostave*] the army ... Of the total number of divisions, a third are mechanized [*mekhanizirovannnye*] divisions. That is not general knowledge, but you need to know it. Of the 100 [mechanized] divisions, two-thirds are tank [divisions], and one third mechanized [*mekhanizirovannnye*; the meaning here must be 'motorized'].³ No one was prepared to challenge these assumptions, but the reality, as Zhukov admitted in 1956, was very different: 'When the war broke

¹ Zhukov and Timoshenko memo to Stalin and Molotov, c. 12 Feb. 1941, *1941 god*, i. 620.

² Zakharov, *General'nyi shtab*, p. 228.

out, the majority of our mechanized corps and divisions were still in the state of being formed and trained, as a result of which they entered battle weakly equipped and in a poorly organized state.' According to another source, the paper strength of the Red Army on 22 June was indeed 303 divisions, but one-quarter (about 75) were 'in the process of formation' (*v stadii formirovaniia*).¹

In his memoirs, the future Marshal Zakharov, himself a veteran of the 1940 general staff, was highly critical of MP-41, which 'envisaged the deployment in a very short time of a large number of units and formations'; 'before a storm, in the interests of maintaining high readiness of the armed forces, it is better to be deeply cautious and to make calculations not on the basis of what will be in the future, but what is now, forming the armed forces step by step, taking into account the productive capacity of the defence industry.' (Zakharov, who was later no friend of Zhukov, blamed him for this situation; in fact, Zhukov had just assumed his post.) The most recent semi-official Russian history is even more frank about what was happening: 'In the course of the reorganization of the armed forces that began in 1940 fundamental miscalculations were made, which had literally catastrophic consequences.'²

One other aspect of MP-41 was problematic. It foresaw two 'variants' for implementing mobilization. One was the public (*otkrytym poriadkom*) general mobilization of all the Soviet armed forces or of individual MDs, announced by a decree of the Supreme Soviet. The other involved mobilization of individual MDs and of individual units and formations in hidden form (*skrytym poriadkom*) by private notification. This was to be accomplished in the guise of 'large-scale training manoeuvres' (*Bol'shie uchebnye sbory*). While it was not clear how far such a hidden mobilization was a practical possibility, especially in terms of large-scale mobilization, it was an option that was soon to be considered very seriously.³

The next version of the operational war plan was completed on 11 March 1941, by which time Zhukov had effectively been in his post as chief of the general staff for six weeks. Again, Vasilevskii wrote it up. This was a 'refined [*utochnennyi*] plan for the strategic deployment of

1 Stalin, speech of 5 May 1941, "Sovremennaiia armia – armia nastupatel'naia". Vystupleniia I. V. Stalina na prieme v Kremle pered vypusknikami voennykh akademii. Mai 1941 g., ed. A. A. Pechenkin, *Istoricheskii arkhiv* (1995, no. 2), p. 26; Zhukov, draft speech of May 1956, *Georgii Zhukov: Stenogramma oktiabr'skogo (1957 g.) plenuma TsK KPSS i drugie dokumenty*, ed. V. Naumov et al. (Moscow, 2001), p. 138; *Istoriia voennoi strategii Rossii*, ed. V. A. Zolotarev (Moscow, 2000), p. 286. On the planning system, see L. Samuelson, *Plans for Stalin's War Machine: Tukhachevskii and Military-Economic Planning, 1925-41* (Basingstoke, 2000), pp. 188-99, and N. S. Simonov, *Voenno-promyshlennyi kompleks SSSR v 1920 – 1950-e gody: Tempy ekonomicheskogo rosta, struktura, organizatsiia proizvodstva i upravlenie* (Moscow, 1996), pp. 115-34.

2 Zakharov, *General'nyi shtab*, pp. 227, 229; *Velikaia Otechestvennaia voina, 1941-5: Voenno-istoricheskie ocherki*, ed. V. A. Zolotarev et al. (Moscow, 1998), i. 83.

3 Zhukov and Timoshenko memo to Stalin and Molotov, c. 12 Feb. 1941, *1941 god*, i. 617, 630-1; Draft Sovnarkom decree, 12 Feb. 1941, *ibid.*, pp. 646-7.

the Armed Forces of the Soviet Union in the West and the East'. It was a 'refined' version of the September 1940 plan, and of the variant that had been approved in October 1940.¹ Changes were supposedly called for 'by the major organizational measures which are being carried out in the Red Army in 1941'. This must have been in part a reference to the just-completed MP-41. The March 1941 plan was based on a fully mobilized Red Army of 309 divisions, and the number of divisions considered available in the west on mobilization rose from 191 (in the September 1940 plan) to 253. Within this western strength, the number of tank divisions jumped from sixteen (plus fifteen independent tank brigades) to the – impossible – total of fifty-four. The March plan was also influenced by the results of the January war games and confirmed the southern rather than the northern option (southern Poland rather than East Prussia).

Vasilevskii discussed the plan in his memoirs, and he suggested that the difference between it and its predecessors stemmed from intelligence that was received from February 1941 about German troop transfers. It is not clear, however, that the March plan was brought about solely by the perception of this threat. Compared with the September 1940 plan, the estimate of German divisions currently located on the Soviet border rose by less than 20 per cent, from 94 to 111. The estimated total German strength that the Red Army was expected to have to face in wartime rose by a lower proportion, from 173 to 200.² Unlike the Soviet September 1940 war plan, that of March 1941 did identify the Ukraine as the most threatened area: 'Germany will most likely deploy its main forces in the south-east, from Siedlce to Hungary in order to seize the Ukraine by means of a blow to Berdichev and Kiev.'³ This new – and incorrect – Soviet assessment did not, however, lead to the unfortunate Red Army concentration in the Ukraine; that decision had been made the previous autumn.

There is a striking historiographical discrepancy between the March 1941 war plan and the others: it has not yet been published in its entirety. What is unclear from the available text is the expected action of the Red Army. Section V, 'Bases of Our Strategic Deployment in the West', takes up ten full pages in the published text of the September 1940 plan. It included the following: (a) general aims of the Red Army in the West; (b) the 'basic tasks' of each army group (and fleet);

¹ Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941, *VIZh* (1992, no. 2), pp. 18–22. The March document is still a mystery; even less was known about it in the mid-1990s when Roberts wrote her important articles about pre-war planning, and she did not actually refer to it. She made a seemingly incorrect distinction between (a) a 'spring of 1941' general staff document 'which provided further guidance on the war plans' ('Planning', p. 1317, 'Oshibki', pp. 238–9), and (b) a May 'proposal for a preemptive strike' ('Planning', p. 1320, 'Oshibki', pp. 240–1). For 'a' she cites the published version of the May plan in *NNI* (1993, no. 3), pp. 40–5, i.e., the same document as 'b'.

² A. M. Vasilevskii, *Delo vsei zhizni* (Moscow, 1989), i. 112–13; Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, 1941 *god*, i. 250; Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941, *VIZh* (1992, no. 2), p. 19.

³ Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941, *VIZh* (1992, no. 2), p. 20.

(c) details of the number of divisions and aviation regiments assigned to each army group; and (d) details of how many divisions would be available at certain intervals after the start of mobilization. In contrast, in the first published text (1992) of the March 1941 plan, there was nothing in Section V except a comment about the difficulties of the northern sector for a Red Army advance (and there was no indication that any text had been left out). The most recently published text of the document in the apparently authoritative collection *1941 god* (1998) leaves this section out altogether (although to their credit the editors indicate missing text with an ellipsis).¹ However, in 1993 and 1995, Iu. A. Gor'kov, a colonel-general and one of the leading specialists on the history of the pre-war plans, cited the following passage, which has evidently been omitted from the two published 'full' texts. It is evidently from the beginning of Section V and is about the best options for the Red Army in the West:

The most suitable is a deployment of our main forces to the south of the Pripiat' River [i.e., south of the Poles'ia] so that they can, by means of powerful blows towards Lublin, Radom, and Kraków, set themselves one strategic objective: to defeat the main forces of the Germans and in the very first stage of the war to cut Germany off from the Balkan countries, to deprive it of its most important economic bases, and decisively to influence the Balkan states in the question of their participation in the war against us ...

The first strategic objective is the destruction of the main concentration of [German] forces in the region Lublin-Radom-Sandomierz and the establishment of a front on the line Warsaw-Łódź-Kluczbork-Opole.

The subsequent strategic objective for the main forces of the Red Army, depending on how the situation develops, can be set [as follows] – the development of the operation through Poznań to Berlin or of action to the south-west towards Prague and Vienna or a blow to the north towards Toruń and Danzig with the objective of bypassing East Prussia.²

From this, it is evident that the proposal was essentially the southern variant of the September 1940 plan, the one that had been confirmed by the politburo on 14 October.

Another senior Russian officer-turned-historian, General of the Army M. A. Gareev, produced an even more striking element of the document. In a passage about the basic task of the Southwestern Army Group (presumably also in Section V), there was an extraordinary written comment by Lieutenant General N. F. Vatutin: 'The offensive is to begin on 12.6 [*Nastuplenie nachat' 12.6*].'³ Vatutin was the deputy

1 Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941, *VIZh* (1992, no. 2), pp. 18–22; Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941, *1941 god*, i. 741–6.

2 Iu. A. Gor'kov, 'Gotovil li Stalin uprezhdaiushchii udar protiv Gitler v 1941 g.', *NNI* (1993, no. 3), p. 35 (the first and third paragraphs); Iu. A. Gor'kov, *Kremli'. Stavka. Genshtab* (Tver', 1995), p. 61 (the second and third paragraphs).

3 Gareev, *Stranitsy*, pp. 93, 99. Gareev is one of the leading anti-revisionists, and his candour here is praiseworthy: 'It is true that this date was not later confirmed, but it would seem that Vatutin did not think it up on his own.' Perhaps this date was based on working forward from a general mobilization

chief of the general staff, and Zhukov's immediate subordinate. Gareev did not, unfortunately, print the 'basic task' of Southwestern Army Group, but it must have been essentially the same as in the September 1940 plan:

firmly covering the border of Bessarabia and Northern Bukovina, after the concentration of forces, in collaboration with 4th Army of Western Army Group, to inflict a decisive defeat on the Lublin-Sandomierz grouping of the enemy, and to reach the line of the Vistula River. After that to strike a blow in the direction of Kielce-Piotrków and towards Kraków, taking the Kielce-Piotrków area and to reach the line of the Pilica River [a tributary of the Vistula] and the headwaters of the Oder River.¹

This would also be consistent with the task of Southwestern Army Group in the May 1941 plan (see below).

The March plan was about operations that would take place at some time in the future. German strength (as assessed by the general staff) had not built up to a level near that given in the plan. In addition, the planners included Soviet forces that did not yet exist. The Red Army did not have forty-five tank divisions, and the national total of 333 aviation regiments was what MP-41 had – extremely optimistically – projected for 1 January 1942.² On the other hand, Vatutin's annotation suggests *at the very least* that some thought was given to an attack with the more limited forces on hand. Gor'kov (without referring to the Vatutin annotation) suggests that the March war plan was not approved by Stalin, but there is no clear evidence for this. The document was addressed: 'Central committee of the VKP(b), com. Stalin, com. Molotov', so it presumably was sent to them. Timoshenko and Zhukov met Stalin in his Kremlin office on the evenings of 17 March (for 5 hours and 35 minutes) and 18 March (2 hours and 5 minutes). The fact that the March war plan was not signed is not telling, as Stalin's practice was to give only verbal approval to such documents.³

The two months between the completion of the March war plan and the presentation of its successor in the middle of May were very eventful. The Kremlin began to receive contradictory but substantial warnings about Hitler's intention to attack the Soviet Union and reports about the continued movement of German troops to the Soviet border. It is hard to tell how far the measures taken were responses to this intelligence, to the fulfilment of the September 1940 and March 1941

that began on a particular date; it is hard to see any other reason for choosing Thursday, 12 June 1941. The September 1940 plan had envisaged an interval of 30-35 days between the beginning of mobilization and the concentration of sufficient forces in Southwestern Army Group to begin the offensive.

¹ Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, 1941 *god*, i. 243.

² Draft Sovnarkom decree, 12 Feb. 1941, 1941 *god*, i. 642.

³ 'Posetiteli kremlevskogo kabineta I. V. Stalina: Zhurnaly (tetradi) zapisi lits, prinyatykh pervym gensekom 1924-1953 gg.', ed. A. V. Korotkov et al., *Istoricheskii arkhiv* (1996, no. 2), pp. 11-12; Iu. A. Gor'kov and Iu. N. Semin, 'O kharaktere voenno-operativnykh planov SSSR nakanune Velikoi Otechestvennoi voyny. Novye arkhivnye dokumenty', *NNI* (1997, no. 5), p. 109.

offensive war plans, or to the implementation of the 'hidden' aspects of MP-41. They may have been all three. From February 1941, three army group (*front*) headquarters began to be formed on the basis of the existing MDs; the Baltic, Western, and Kiev MDs, respectively, were to become the Northwestern, Western, and Southwestern Army Groups. By a politburo decision of 8 March 1941, over 900,000 reservists were to be called up at various times between 15 May and 20 October 1941 for training camps with under-strength divisions. Between 25 March and 5 April 1941, 394,000 twenty-year-olds were secretly called up. Some preparations were more directly oriented towards offensive operations. In April 1941, five airborne corps were established, 20,000 parachutes ordered, and the design of troop-carrying gliders prioritized. More significantly, Zhukov, from the time of his appointment, pressed Stalin quickly to implement the decision to establish further large armoured formations in the shape of fifteen mechanized corps. (Some nine mechanized corps had been ordered set up after the Fall of France in July 1940; another twenty began formation in February 1941.)¹

The discussion of high command measures in the first half of May relates to Stalin's involvement; these measures will be looked at more fully in the second part of this article. Suffice to mention here that on Tuesday, 13 May, four armies of the high command reserve were ordered to begin movement from the interior to the Western and Kiev MDs. On Wednesday, 14 May, the western border MDs were sent orders to prepare plans for 'covering zones'. This brings us to the May war plan proposal, which was probably completed on the following day, Thursday, 15 May.²

The document has been called the 'Zhukov plan', but it will be referred to here less precisely as the 'May 1941 war plan'.³ For one thing, it appeared over the names of both Timoshenko and Zhukov. The very similar September 1940 war plan was submitted five months before Zhukov became chief of the general staff, and even earlier war plans had an influence; Shaposhnikov and Meretskov, Zhukov's predecessors, bore a share of responsibility. Vasilevskii and Vatutin were also involved in the May plan, as one wrote out the plan and the other amended it. The date of the manuscript is not clear, but it was almost certainly 15 May.⁴

1 Mel'tiukhov, *Shans*, pp. 330, 362-3; Excerpt from politburo decision, 1941 god, i. 731-2; CC decree, 23 April 1941, *ibid.*, ii. 105-6; Zhukov, unpublished memoir, *ibid.*, ii. 506; Gareev, *Stranitsy*, p. 115.

2 Considerations Regarding the Plan for Strategic Deployment, May 1941, printed in Gor'kov, 'Gotivil li', pp. 40-5. Subsequently abbreviated to Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941.

3 Lev Bezymenskii, e.g., recently published an article entitled 'O "plane" Zhukova ot 15 maia 1941 g.', *NNI* (2000, no. 3), pp. 58-67. P. N. Bobylev, in the most incisive study of the document, uses the better term 'the May plan of the general staff' ('Tochku v diskussii stavit' rano: K voprosu o planirovanii v General'nom Shtabe RKKA vozmozhnoi voyny s Germaniei v 1940-1941 godakh', *Otechestvennaia istoriia* [2000, no. 1], p. 43).

4 As we will see, there is oral evidence from Zhukov that the draft was completed on 15 May. For written evidence, there are several major texts of the May 1941 plan, and a facsimile. The best

The document actually falls into two parts, a war plan proper (Sections I-VIII), and five concrete requests put by Timoshenko and Zhukov to Stalin (Section IX). The first part outlined the deployment of the Red Army and a 'plan of intended military actions'. To understand the essence of the document, however, it is best to begin with the second part, the 'requests'.

The first request was for confirmation of the proposed deployment of the army and of the 'plan of intended military actions'. The second, following on from the first, was approval of 'timely' hidden mobilization and hidden concentration of forces, in the first instance of the high command reserve armies and of the air force.

These two requests were also dealt with in the deployment plan itself (Section IV), which listed essential measures requiring 'timely' completion: (a) hidden mobilization under the cover of training manoeuvres; (b) secret concentration of forces close to the frontier under cover of training camps (in the first instance of the high command reserve armies); (c) hidden concentration of the air force on forward airfields; and (d) gradual deployment of the rear echelon.

The third request (in Section IX) was for completion of railway construction; the fourth, assurance that industry would supply required tanks, aircraft, munitions, and fuel; and the fifth (a late addition), confirmation of the proposal for construction of new fortified regions.¹

Neither the 'plan of intended military actions' nor the requests were essentially new, contrary to the interpretation given to the war plan by D. A. Volkogonov, when he first revealed its existence in his biography of Stalin in 1989. Volkogonov only printed two paragraphs, without making fully clear that they came from the middle of a much longer document. From the short passage cited, this 'radical' proposal sounded like an informal initiative by an overly decisive Zhukov;² in fact, the fifteen-page manuscript was very similar to the war plans of September 1940 and March 1941. It had a similar general theme, 'considerations on the plan for the strategic deployment of the Armed Forces of the USSR ...'. This time, however, it was '... in the event of war with Germany and her allies' rather than '... in the West and in the East in 1940 and 1941' (as in the September 1940 and March 1941 plans).³ In its full version, the war plan had the same general structure: a description of the strength and intentions of the enemy, a statement of Soviet strategic objectives, a proposed allocation of Soviet forces to

annotated version is that published in 1993 by Gor'kov ('Gotovil li', pp. 40-5), but this should be compared with another version published by him in 1995 (Gor'kov, *Kremli*', pp. 303-9). Another full text was published in 1998 in *1941 god*, ii, 215-20. A facsimile of the first and last pages appeared in Bezymenskii, *Gidler i Stalin*, pp. 478-9. The second Gor'kov edition includes the date 15 May, and it also gives the fullest version of the heading material.

¹ Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, *NNI*, pp. 43-5.

² Volkogonov, *Triumf i tragediia*, kn. II, *chast' 1*, p. 136.

³ The manuscript did not actually have a title, but this phrase, 'considerations ...', comes in the first introductory paragraph.

the various sectors, and details of the deployment of Soviet forces to the West and to the reserves of the Supreme Command. Like the other plans, it was a manuscript drafted by Vasilevskii but, unlike them, it included a number of last-minute corrections, evidently by Vatutin.¹ There were four appendices: (1) a 1:1,000,000 map showing proposed Red Army deployment; (2) three maps showing plans for covering the frontier; (3) a table of comparative strengths; and (4) three maps showing the basing of the Red Army air force in the West. It was, then, not a mere sketch but a proposal created with all the resources of the general staff and, in essence, as much a war plan as the documents drafted in September 1940 and March 1941.

More to the point, the 'plan of intended military actions' in May was the same as what Stalin had first seen in September 1940, approved in October 1940, and considered again in March 1941. The 'first strategic objective of the forces of the Red Army' in the May plan was as follows:

the destruction of the main forces of the German Army which are deployed south of Dęblin and the arrival by the 30th day of the operation at the line Ostrołęka, Narew River, Łowicz, Łódź, Kluczbork, Opole, Olomouc. The subsequent strategic objective is: an offensive from the region of Katowice in a northern or north-western direction to destroy the main forces of the centre and northern wing of the German Front and to conquer the territory of former Poland and East Prussia.²

This advance, as in the September and March plans, took in most of southern Poland. The great left hook of the Red Army would still consist of the Southwestern Army Group, which had two objectives. First, the right flank armies of the Army Group were 'by a concentric blow ... to surround and destroy the main grouping of the enemy east of the Vistula in the Lublin area'. Ironically, this 'grouping' was the German 6th Army, which actually *was* surrounded and destroyed according to a plan worked out by Vasilevskii, but eighteen months later and a thousand miles to the east. At the same time, Southwestern Army Group was 'to smash [*razbit'*] the forces of the enemy in the Sandomierz-Kielce direction and to conquer [*ovladet'*] the Kraków, Katowice, and Kielce districts'.³

¹ Gor'kov stated that the corrections were made in the handwriting of Vatutin ('Gotovil li', p. 40). The differences between the three versions of the document are partly 'explained' by the legibility of the comments. Thus, the 1993 Gor'kov version included in Section II the following important addition: 'The most immediate task is to destroy the German army east of the Vistula River and in the Kraków direction, to advance to the line of the rivers Narew and Vistula, and to take the Katowice area' (ibid., p. 41). This passage is then described as illegible (!) in the 1995 version (Gor'kov, *Kreml'*, p. 305), but had evidently become legible again by 1998, when it was published in *1941 god* (p. 216). Perhaps not too much should be read into this (*pace* Bobylev, 'Tochku', pp. 50-1, 54), as all versions make clear the general advance into Poland.

² Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 41.

³ Ibid., p. 43.

The future Northwestern and Western Army Groups still had the task of a 'stubborn defence' of the Riga, Vi'lno, Lida, and Belostok directions, at least until the offensive of Southwestern Army Group began.¹ Then, the left wing of Western Army Group was to help encircle the German Lublin group. A correction added that this advance was to include the conquest of Warsaw.

It is impossible to agree with Gorodetsky that this war plan was 'clearly defined and limited' or with the German historian Bernd Bonwetsch that it was a 'limited preventative blow'. The proposed offensive involved the main strength of the Red Army. The key assumption was that the Red Army would have local superiority, with 152 divisions against 100 German ones. Gorodetsky suggests that the May plan can somehow be explained as an embodiment of 'the very complicated [Red Army] doctrine of the "deep operation"' and was therefore intended only to disrupt the German build-up. This hardly seems a convincing interpretation of the quintessentially offensive 'deep operation' concept. Nor can it be argued categorically that what was planned was *not* 'the creation of a base of operations for the occupation of the central part of Europe'. The May plan referred to conquering Poland and East Prussia; the September 1940 and March 1941 plans, of which it was a development, referred to an advance *at least* to Silesia, and the March plan apparently alluded to variants for advances to Danzig, Berlin, Prague, or Vienna.²

There was one apparent difference, and an extraordinary one at that, between the May 1941 war plan and its predecessors. Before May, the Soviet offensive plans seem to have been presented in terms of a *counter-offensive*, to be mounted after the enemy had initiated the war and after a Soviet mobilization period (thirty days in the September 1940 version). That had been the formal premise of the January 1941 war games. The May plan envisaged a surprise attack by the Red Army, a 'sudden blow [*vnezapnyi udar*] against the enemy, both from the air and on land', following a 'hidden mobilization'.³ Zhukov

¹ Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 45.

² Gorodetsky, *Delusion*, p. 238; V. A. Nevezhin, *Sindrom nastupatel'noi voiny* (Moscow, 1997), p. 260 (Bonwetsch); Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 41. Gorodetsky records that his view of 'deep operations' was influenced by Shimon Naveh (*Delusion*, p. xv; S. Naveh, *In Pursuit of Military Excellence: The Evolution of Operational Theory* [Tel Aviv, 1997]). Naveh, in my reading, does not suggest that the basic orientation of the concept, and of its Red Army progenitors like Tukhachevskii and Triandafillov, was anything other than offensive (*Pursuit*, pp. 164-249). For a more straightforward discussion of 'deep operations', see R. W. Harrison, *The Russian Way of War: Operational Art, 1904-40* (Lawrence, 2001), pp. 194-217. Harrison correctly notes that Tukhachevskii's 'intentions were overwhelmingly offensive' (p. 185). A. A. Kokoshin, *Armii i politika: Sovetskaia voenno-politicheskaia i voenno-strategicheskaia mysl', 1918-1991 gody* (Moscow, 1995), pp. 175-239, is a broad introduction to the offensive orientation of Russian doctrine. See also the excellent analysis in Roberts, 'Planning', pp. 1297-307; many of the documents she cites on the period 1921-38 have not yet been published.

³ Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 43; V. A. Anfilov, '... Razgovor zakonchilsia ugrozoi Stalina': Desiat' besed s marshalom G. K. Zhukovym v mae-iune 1965 goda', *VIZh* (1995, no. 2), p. 41.

himself later described it as a 'pre-emptive blow' (*predupreditel'nyi udar*), if we accept the text of an interview with him in the 1960s. M. I. Mel'tiukhov has suggested that the earlier 'counter-offensive' war plans were also *really* about offensives in which the Red Army would take the initiative, and Cynthia Roberts noted that 'Soviet military leaders ... had often expressed an interest in preemption *prior* to an anticipated enemy first strike.'¹ It would be necessary to see the full text of the March 1941 plan to be certain that the May plan was actually a new departure.

In any event, given this concept of the 'sudden blow', the real nub of the historical debate about the May 1941 war plan is timing. Leaving aside, for the moment, Stalin's response to the proposal, what did the Red Army planners intend? How far ahead were they looking? The Soviet May war plan was certainly ambiguous and confusing, and was no doubt intentionally so. Unlike the plan of September 1940 (and possibly unlike that of March 1941), the May 1941 war plan did not even give mobilization timings: as military leaders operating within the Stalinist system, Timoshenko and Zhukov would have been extremely rash to commit the Soviet state, even hypothetically, to beginning war at a particular date. Formally, the May plan only requested that Stalin 'at the appropriate time [*svoevremennno*] permit the ... carrying out of hidden mobilization and hidden concentration in the first instance of all armies of the high command reserve and of aviation forces'.² The famous *Barbarossa* directive of 18 December 1940, in contrast, set an attack date of 15 May 1941 (later pushed forward seven weeks), but that document was issued directly over Hitler's name. The Soviet May war plan was, in fact, in some respects more like the preliminary plan (*Operationsentwurf*) completed by General Marcks for the German army general staff on 5 August 1940; it outlined an invasion to be initiated by Germany but it did not specify a time of attack.³

No one has suggested that Timoshenko and Zhukov's plan involved *immediate* action, such as an attack into Poland in the middle of May 1941. The May war plan, like its predecessors, was above all a staged procedure: first, mobilization and concentration (covered by screening forces on the frontier), and then attack (either pre-emptive attack or counter-attack). Given the ambiguity of the May document, it is perhaps best to look at it in terms of three other possibilities. In the first alternative, the high command was proposing the immediate beginning of large-scale hidden mobilization and the continued movement west of the high command reserve armies (initiated on 13 May). Based on the timings of earlier mobilization plans, and assuming the 'sudden blow' would come immediately after the completion of hidden

¹ Mel'tiukhov, *Shans*, p. 385; Roberts, 'Planning', pp. 1302-3, 1319-20, 1323 n. 31, 1326 n. 113.

² Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 45.

³ Ueberschär and Bezemesnkij, *Angriff*, pp. 223-38, 250-3.

mobilization and concentration, this alternative would suggest a proposed surprise attack in mid- or late July 1941 (which is the period cited by some revisionist historians). A second alternative would involve a later beginning of large-scale mobilization and concentration or a longer gap between the completion of mobilization and concentration and the launching of the 'sudden blow' (or even *both* a delayed beginning *and* a longer gap between concentration and attack). This would have allowed for an attack later in 1941. In a third scenario, the May plan was one of general orientation, with the intention of a considerably later mobilization, concentration, and attack, perhaps in 1942. This would have allowed for the further expansion, equipping, and training of the Red Army and the air force.

Determining which possibility is most plausible requires looking at a range of factors. One of them is the Soviet estimate of the state of German readiness. The May plan was literally a proposal to put the Red Army in a position to be able to pre-empt the Germans *at a particular time in the future*, when the Germans were in the last stages of preparing an attack on the Soviet Union, *and not before*. The assessment was that the state of German readiness had become more ominous than in September or March:

Bearing in mind that Germany at the present time is holding its army in a mobilized state with its rear echelon deployed [*s razvernutyimi tylami*], it has the possibility to *pre-empt* [*predupredit'*] us in deployment and to deliver a sudden blow.

To avert [*predotvratit'*] this, I consider it absolutely necessary not to give the initiative to the German command, to *forestall* [*upredit'*] the enemy in deployment and to attack the German army at that moment when it is [still] being deployed and has not yet been able to organize a front and the co-ordination of the different branches of service.¹

This could only be implemented after the (hidden) mobilization of the Red Army. The May proposal was pre-emptive, and the Soviet high command's intelligence assessment was crucial. If it was obvious that the *Wehrmacht* was about to attack, then Timoshenko and Zhukov *were* actually thinking in the short term. Between February and May, the Germans had indeed started to concentrate their infantry forces for *Barbarossa*. In an interview near his death, Vasilevskii argued that the Red Army high command was aware of the danger: 'There was more than enough evidence that Germany planned a military attack on our country. In our era aggressive preparations are very difficult [or] practically impossible to hide.'²

¹ Strategic Deployment Plan, 18 Sept. 1940, *1941 god*, i. 239; Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941, *VIZh* (1992, no. 2), p. 20; Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 41. One very useful map, showing the situation on 1 June 1941 as (mis-)perceived by the Soviet high command, has been published as a facsimile: L. Dvoinykh and N. Tarkhova, 'O chem dokladyvala voennaiia razvedka', *Nauka i zhizn'* (1995, no. 3), p. 10.

² G. A. Kumaneyev, *Riadam so Stalinyim: Otkrovennye svidetel'stva* (Moscow, 1999), pp. 232-3.

Soviet intelligence is one of the most discussed aspects of *Barbarossa*, and space does not permit an extensive analysis here. Nevertheless, it could be argued that Vasilevskii was basing this assessment on hindsight and that at the time the high command was not convinced that a German attack was imminent. There is no clear evidence that the May 1941 plan was motivated by a high command perception of any rapid *new* German build-up in Poland and East Prussia. (A bigger factor, as we shall see, may have been Stalin's speech of 5 May.) The Red Army estimate of current German strength had not grown by a very great amount in the period before mid-May: in the May plan, it was put at 284 divisions, with 180 likely to be deployed against the Soviet Union, and 120 currently (15 April) located on the Soviet border; the 11 March figures had been 260, 200, and 111.¹ The German army, then, may have been mobilized, but as far as the Soviet planners could see, it was not yet concentrated in the East. The May plan implied the movement east of another sixty German divisions, which would take some considerable time even after Germany decided upon this action. From this perspective, a Soviet 'sudden strike' in July, based on a perceived German threat, becomes less convincing.

The high command's sense of timing was also affected by the period required to mobilize Soviet forces. Unfortunately, even the extent of mobilization proposed by Timoshenko and Zhukov in May is not clear. One request (Section IX) referred ambiguously to 'hidden mobilization [*otmobilizovaniia*] and hidden concentration in the first instance of all reserve armies of the high command and of aviation'. Hidden mobilization in the form of 'Large-scale Training Exercises' had been a feature of Red Army war planning for some time, and was confirmed in MP-41; but it was not clear whether the May plan envisaged hidden *general* mobilization, and concentration ('in the first instance') of only certain armies, or if it meant that *both* mobilization and concentration should ('in the first instance') only apply to certain armies. That the high command wanted the former (general mobilization) rather than the latter is suggested by an earlier passage (Section IV), which refers to a 'hidden mobilization of forces' without qualification. In any event, the May war plan took into account not just the mobilization of the high command reserve, but the general mobilization of the Red Army to its full strength, officially comprising 303 divisions, with 258 of them deployed in the West.²

Related to this is the difference between, on the one hand, the proposed Soviet ground forces attack strength and, on the other, the forces actually on hand in May-June 1941. Table 1 gives detailed figures cited by the general staff in mid-May 1941, when it ordered the

1 Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, pp. 40-1; Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941, *VIZh* (1992, no. 2), pp. 18-19.

2 Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, pp. 41-3, 45.

TABLE 1: May 1941 War Plan:
Required and Available Ground Forces (Divisions)

	Required for May 1941 War Plan	Available 14 May 1941 (Covering Plans)	Available mid-June 1941 (Zhukov)	Available 13 June 1941 (Vatutin)
Northwestern AG				
TD	4	4	4	4
MD	2	2	2	2
RD	23	16	19	17
CD	—	—	2	—
TOTAL DIVISIONS	29	22	27	23
Western AG				
TD	8	8	12	12
MD	4	4	6	6
RD	31	12	24	24
CD	2	2	2	2
TOTAL DIVISIONS	45	26	44	48
Southwestern AG				
TD	28	18	20	20
MD	15	9	10	10
RD	74	35	45	43
CD	5	5	5	4
TOTAL DIVISIONS	122	67	70	77

SOURCES:

Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, *NNI* (1993, no. 3), pp. 41-4; Iu. A. Gor'kov and Iu. N. Semin, 'Konets global'noi lzh', *VIZh* (1996, no. 2), pp. 6ff. (NWAG); no. 3, pp. 8ff. (WAG); no. 4, pp. 3-8; no. 5, pp. 8ff. (SWAG); Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, i. 367; Vatutin, Report on Deployment, 13 June 1941, *1941 god*, ii. 358-61. TD = tank division, MD = motorized division, RD = rifle (infantry) division, CD = cavalry division. NWAG is based on Baltic MD, WAG on Western MD, and SWAG on Kiev and Odessa MDs, excluding small forces in the Crimea. 'Covering plans' is based on detailed strengths cited in directives sent to MD commanders in mid-May. The figure of 43 rifle divisions in SWAG in the 'Vatutin' column excludes 20 rifle divisions that he put under SWAG command, but which were physically still in the Khar'kov, Orel, and Volga MDs (in the document Vatutin's total for SWAG was 63 rifle divisions and a total of 97 divisions).

various MDs to prepare 'covering' plans. (The table also includes figures for actual strength in mid-June given by Zhukov and by his deputy, Vatutin; these will be discussed later.) It shows that when the May plan was proposed, the actual strength on hand in the key Southwestern Army Group was only about half what was specified, 67 divisions out of 122.

The May plan certainly included the option of *beginning* mobilization as soon as possible, and for this it was necessary to cover the frontier, which in turn involved the drafting of up-to-date covering plans. The planners proposed that covering and air defence plans be completed by 1 June.¹ The implications of the immediate beginning of mobilization are not clear; this was to have been, as already mentioned, a phased procedure. P. N. Bobylev, perhaps the most thoughtful revisionist, has argued the high command were essentially proposing a mid-July attack date because the mobilized Red Army could not be kept doing nothing for an indefinite period.² It is not certain that this is correct. There were certainly reasons for not mobilizing before it was necessary, and reasons for proceeding directly to attack once mobilization was complete; these reasons were, however, essentially diplomatic or economic. The diplomatic impact of mobilization was that it might so alarm the prospective enemy that war would become inevitable; the economic impact included the removal of workers, horses, and trucks from industry and agriculture, which would complicate, among other things, the completion of rearmament. There was, however, no inherent reason, from the point of view of the mobilization planners, why a much larger Red Army could not be readied without proceeding inevitably to the next stage of the actual attack. Timoshenko and Zhukov could plausibly have considered a delay between mobilization and the beginning of war.

The May 1941 plan was also ambiguous about the Red Army air force. The air element for the May war plan was based on a national air strength of 218 aviation regiments which supposedly currently existed (see Table 2). The plan envisaged 165 aviation regiments in the West and the high command reserve, the strength available in mid-June. This was, by the way, a huge force of about 6,600 aircraft. The war plan, however, also referred to a projected addition, *by 1 January 1942*, of a further 101 aviation regiments. This implied a total national strength of 333 aviation regiments by 1 January 1942, the same as anticipated in the March 1941 war plan and in MP-41.³

The timing of any Soviet pre-emptive strike would have been greatly affected by transport and supply considerations. In his memoirs, Zhukov reported pessimistic assessments of the situation on the

¹ Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 44.

² Bobylev, 'Tochku', p. 57.

³ Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 42; Strategic Deployment Plan, 11 March 1941, *VIZh* (1992, no. 2), pp. 21-2; Draft Sovnarkom decree, 12 Feb. 1941, *1941 god*, i. 642.

TABLE 2: May 1941 War Plan:
Required and Available Air Units (Aviation Regiments)

	Required for May 1941 War Plan (Plan)	Available 13 June 1941 (Vatutin)
Northern AG		18
Northwestern AG		13
Western AG		21
Southwestern AG		85
TOTAL IN WESTERN AGS	144	137
RGK	21	29
Eastern USSR	33	33
Other	20	26
TOTAL COMBAT-READY	218	225
FORMING	115	NA

SOURCES:

Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, *NNI* (1993, no. 3), p. 42 (May plan); Vatutin, Report on deployment, 13 June 1941, *1941 god*, ii. 58-361. There is apparently a mathematical error in the published document, as the total in the Western AGs was supposed to be 130 aviation regiments, but the figures for the four AGs total 137. There were about forty aircraft in a regiment. RGK is the high command reserve. 'Eastern USSR' is Transbaikal MD and Far Eastern AG; 'other' includes Arkhangel'sk, Transcaucasus and Central Asian MDs, and Moscow air defence.

railways by Vatutin and Timoshenko. The May plan stated that it was necessary '*gradually [postепенно]* under the cover of training exercises and rear training to deploy the rear echelon and the hospital base' (emphasis added). In late May 1941, Lieutenant General N. I. Trubetskoi, the chief of the Red Army's administration of military communications, submitted a general report noting the sharp gap in railway-carrying capacity in the zone between the old and new border; he urged accelerated construction work on track and installations. According to him, in the 'western theatre' railway-carrying capacity to

the old border was 871 pairs of trains a day, compared to 444 to the new border (and, ominously, 988 on the *other* side of the new border). He contrasted the existing expenditure of 799 million rubles for railway construction and development planned by the transport commissariat (NKPS) for 1941 with 7,276 million rubles planned by the defence commissariat, and 2,181 million rubles approved by the government. (Despite his prescience, Trubetskoi would be shot in 1941.)¹ Indeed, the May war plan asked that the government demand of the transport commissariat 'the completion in full and at the appropriate time [*svoevremenno*] of work on the railways according to the [19]41 plan and especially in the L'vov direction'. Furthermore, the 152 Soviet divisions advancing into southern Poland and the 3,000-4,000 attacking aircraft would have required huge amounts of fuel and ammunition. The May plan specified, among other requirements, a month's supply of medium- and heavy-calibre ammunition, of aviation bombs, and of diesel fuel; it also specified a month and a half's supply of automotive petrol, as sufficient stocks had not been built up in the western Soviet Union for early movement. The May proposal noted that 'supplies of fuel intended for the western military districts have to a significant extent been stored in the inner military districts (due to a lack of storage space in the territory [of the border districts]).' The supply difficulties that the Red Army faced in the days immediately after 22 June are well known, and that was without any movement forward. For example, at his post-invasion trial, the doomed General Pavlov complained that his Western MD had been granted a full allocation of fuel, but that the fuel was still in Maikop in the North Caucasus.² None of this was consistent with a Soviet offensive in July 1941.

The need for more detailed planning is another factor that might have affected timing. The military historian M. A. Gareev, who was a General of the Army with extensive staff experience, noted that the top-level war plans could only be the very beginning of the process, and that at least three or four months of intensive staff activity would be required to draft corresponding formation and unit plans. On the other hand, the earlier versions of war plans should already have led to some lower-level planning. Timoshenko and Meretskov's October 1940 acceptance of the September 1940 war plan, for example, specified that 'all plans for the deployment and action of forces ... are to be completed by 1 May 1941.'³

1 Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, i. 312, 367; Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 44; Trubetskoi report, 26 May 1941, *Tyl Krasnoi Armii v Velikoi Otechestvennoi voine 1941-1945 gg. Dokumenty i materialy*, ed. V. A. Zolotarev et al. (Moscow, 1996), RA/VO, xxv (xiv), 54-60; B. W. Menning, 'Sovetskie zheleznye dorogi i planirovanie voennykh deistvii. 1941 god', in *Voina i politika*, ed. Chubarian, pp. 359-65. On the Kiev MD in particular, see Purkaev memo, c. Dec. 1940, *1941 god*, i. 491-2.

2 Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, pp. 44-5; Interrogation of General Pavlov, 7 July 1941, *1941 god*, ii. 462.

3 Gareev, *Stranitsy*, p. 96; Timoshenko and Meretskov, memo to Stalin and Molotov, no earlier than

The final version of the May plan, taking into account the corrections, also included long-term *defensive* preparations; this was the most significant change to the original document. What Vasilevskii originally wrote in Section VI ('Covering the Concentration and Deployment') involved covering only the frontier and planning air defence, which were logical elements of preparing an offensive. The new text added the following paragraph: 'Simultaneously it is necessary by all means to accelerate [*forsirovat*'] the construction and equipping of fortified regions, to begin construction of fortified regions on the rear line Ostashkov-Pochep [140 miles west of Moscow], and to consider the construction of new fortified regions in 1942 on the border with Hungary and also to continue the construction of fortified regions on the line of the old state border.' There were thus three planned lines of defence: the current border, the line of the old 1939 border (the so-called 'Stalin Line', which had been partly dismantled in order to equip the defences of the new frontier), and the Ostashkov-Pochep line covering Moscow. This was also put in as an additional (fifth) request to Stalin at the end of the document in Section IX: 'to confirm the proposal for the construction of new fortified regions'. All of this assumed action set well in the future (1942 for the Hungarian border fortifications).¹ More important, it implied a diversion of scarce resources from the manning and equipping of the offensive formations to the manning and equipping of the layered defence of central Russia. This suggests at some stage – and perhaps at the highest level – an element of compromise or confusion, and perhaps both.

To sum up, in the May plan Zhukov and Timoshenko were certainly requesting that steps be taken. Their 'plan of intended military actions' was – strangely enough – the least controversial aspect of the document: they were just restating the September 1940 and March 1941 war plans for offensive operations in southern Poland. They were also, it would seem, proposing the beginning of mobilization, for which implementation of the covering plans was an essential first step (and which in turn required the final *drafting* of those plans by 1 June 1941). But it is not clear that, for the high command, mobilization and deployment were directly to be followed by the 'sudden blow'. The mobilized Red Army and air force would still have been far below the MP-41 establishment. There are references in the high command plan to long-term production, logistics, and defensive factors, and these are not consistent with an attack on Germany in July 1941.

* * * * *

Such were the evolution and main features of war planning by the Soviet general staff in the Timoshenko era, leading without serious

⁵ Oct. 1940, 1941 *god*, i. 290.

¹ Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, pp. 44–5.

deviation to the May 1941 plan. Stalin's involvement in this process remains controversial. If Stalin approved the May plan, then the Soviet Union was readying an offensive war against Germany. This is in line with the general argument of Rezun-Suvorov and the more extreme revisionists. If he rejected the plan, it might suggest an irresponsible initiative by the Red Army high command. Traditionalists, in fact, question the importance of the May plan. Some Russian historians assert that the May document was just a 'variant' for discussion *within* the general staff, one of several proposed scenarios; O. V. Vishlev argued that 'the document in question never left the confines of the general staff building.'¹ In the West, Glantz suggested that perhaps Stalin never even saw the May 1941 war plan. In *Stumbling Colossus*, the May 1941 proposal is left out of the discussion of 'war and strategic deployment planning on the eve of war' and is confined to a later chapter on 'Red Army Intelligence on the Eve of the War'; Glantz's most recent book on 1941 relegates the May proposal to an endnote. Even Roberts, writing in 1995, was non-committal about whether the plan was seen by Stalin.²

Stalin was not as well informed at this time about operational military matters as he would be later (he probably knew more about questions of military production). Zhukov maintained that the dictator showed little interest before the war in the activities of the general staff, and that there was never a comprehensive discussion on the state of national defence, including a discussion 'about our military options and about the options of our potential enemy'. According to Zhukov, Stalin only infrequently heard reports from him and Timoshenko. While I would not disagree with this assessment of Stalin's limitations, Stalin clearly occupied himself with military questions even at this time. He received Timoshenko in his Kremlin office on average once a week between October 1940 and 22 June 1941, and he would have been in frequent contact with Voroshilov, who was a member of the politburo and chairman of Sovnarkom's defence committee. Stalin does seem genuinely to have been an advocate of the strategy of the offensive: 'defence', he privately told Timoshenko in December 1940, 'is really useful only when it is a means for the organization of an offensive, and not as an end in itself.'³ Stalin was aware of the military planning that was going on, and he had approved the southern variant of the September 1940 war plan. He had also followed the course of the January 1941 war games, and had been sent the August 1940 and March 1941 operational plans, as well as the February 1941 mobiliza-

¹ Vishlev, *Nakanune*, pp. 34-5.

² Glantz, *Colossus*, p. 245 and *Barbarossa: Hitler's Invasion of Russia 1941* (Stroud, 2001), p. 215 n. 11; Roberts, 'Planning', p. 1320. Roberts appears to have become less non-committal by the time a Russian-language version of her article was published in 1999, but she still only stated that 'some [unspecified] sources suggest' that the proposal was put to Stalin ('Oshibki', p. 240).

³ Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, i. 329; Korotkov, 'Posetiteli', pp. 28-52; *1941 god*, i. 498 n. 2.

tion plan (MP-41). Moreover, he had appointed Timoshenko, and he evidently made the decisions to replace Shaposhnikov with Meretskov, and Meretskov with Zhukov.

To deal with the most basic question: what is the evidence that Stalin knew about the May 1941 war plan? First of all, the document was addressed to him. While it is true that the manuscript has a number of corrections, and it is surprising that a less-than-perfect document should have been sent by the general staff to Stalin, the two pages that have been published in facsimile indicate that the manuscript was far from a rough draft. It is laid out very neatly in Vasilevskii's handwriting.¹ A previous plan had corrections; Vatutin had added at least one note to the March 1941 plan, that is, the comment about 12 June (see above). At least three explanations suggest themselves for the less-than-perfect state of the existing copy of the May plan: the requirements of haste and secrecy may have led to the use of an unfinished version; the changes may have been made *in Stalin's presence*; and, conceivably, a final draft of this most sensitive document was prepared, kept by Stalin, and subsequently destroyed.

Second, there is strong memoir or oral evidence that Stalin considered the May war plan. Admittedly, this does not come directly from the small group of senior party and military leaders who could have known about the planning. Although Zhukov and Vasilevskii only died in the 1970s, and both were eventually allowed to publish long and important memoirs, neither specifically mentioned the May 1941 war plan. Timoshenko, who died in 1970, left no written memoirs, and Vatutin, Zhukov's deputy in 1941, was mortally wounded by Ukrainian nationalist guerrillas in 1944. Nothing beyond fragments of the basic May war plan was produced from Stalin's papers by his biographer Volkogonov, and there is no reference to the May 1941 war plan in the interviews with Molotov published by Feliks Chuev. (There is, however, one interesting comment in a passage about the immediate pre-war period: 'Marxism-Leninism ... stands for offensive action when it is possible, and when it is not we wait.'²) However, there are three persuasive second-hand sources. Colonels V. A. Anfilov and N. A. Svetlishin recorded separate interviews with Zhukov in the 1960s in which Zhukov said that the proposal for a pre-emptive attack was given to Stalin in May 1941 (and, as we shall see, also stated that it was rejected by Stalin). And General of the Army N. G. Liashchenko gave to the journalist and historian Lev Bezymenskii an account of a conversation with Timoshenko which made the same point.

Evaluating this evidence requires a short detour to events decades after 1941. Zhukov fell out with Nikita Khrushchev in 1957, was dis-

¹ Bezymenskii, *Gitler*, pp. 478-9.

² Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*; Vasilevskii, *Delo*; F. Chuev, *Sto sorok besed s Molotovym: Iz dnevnika Feliksa Chueva* (Moscow, 1991), p. 40.

missed from his post as minister of defence, and was retired from the army. In October 1964, however, Khrushchev himself was ousted. Zhukov, who was still only sixty-eight, began gradually to be rehabilitated. By coincidence, the Soviet Union was also approaching the twentieth anniversary of the final campaigns of the Second World War and of the victory over Germany. Zhukov was eager to tell his own side of the wartime story, and now for the first time it was politically possible for historians to interview him. At the end of 1964, N. A. Svetlishin, then a forty-seven-year-old colonel working in *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* [Military-Historical Journal], went to see Zhukov at his dacha at Sosnovka, outside Moscow. He proposed that Zhukov tell his side of the Battle of Berlin, and an article was duly published. Svetlishin gained Zhukov's confidence and, despite considerable opposition from the marshal's rivals in the military establishment, wrote the assessment in *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* that marked Zhukov's seventieth birthday in 1966.¹ Some twenty-six years later, Svetlishin, now a septuagenarian himself, produced a biography of Zhukov based on numerous conversations. In his book, he reported a discussion with Zhukov about the May war plan. According to this, the Red Army leadership had by the middle of May 1941 come to the conclusion that war was inevitable. In Zhukov's words, 'considering the situation, and having taken the advice of Marshal S. K. Timoshenko, I wrote a memorandum [*dokladnaia zapiska*] in which I set out my proposal for the acceleration of the strategic deployment of the Red Army and for the carrying out of the first operations ... I sent this memorandum to Stalin via his personal secretary Poskrebyshv.² Svetlishin's book, it should be noted, appeared after Volkogonov had revealed the existence of the May 1941 war plan in his biography of Stalin in 1989.

Svetlishin was not the only military historian interviewing the newly rehabilitated Zhukov at Sosnovka in 1964-5. In May 1965, Colonel V. A. Anfilov arranged (through Vasilevskii's son) the first of a series of interviews. Among the subjects discussed was the May 1941 war plan, which Anfilov had become aware of in 1958 while working in the military science administration (*Voenno-nauchnoe upravlenie*) of the general staff on a secret history of the war. At that time, citation of the document had been forbidden by the highest levels of the Red Army.³ Seven years later, Anfilov was able directly to ask Zhukov about the war plan. The marshal replied: 'The concrete task [of drafting a directive] was assigned to A. M. Vasilevskii. On 15 May, he delivered the draft of the directive to the people's commissar [Timoshenko] and me. However,

1 G. K. Zhukov, 'Na Berlinskom napravlenii', *VIZh* (1965, no. 6), pp. 12-22; N. A. Svetlishin, 'Ot soldata do marshala', *VIZh* (1966, no. 11), pp. 31-40.

2 N. A. Svetlishin, *Krutye stupeni sud'by: Zhizn' i ratnye podvigi marshala G. K. Zhukova* (Khabarovsk, 1992), p. 57.

3 V. A. Anfilov, "'Novaia versiiia" i realnost': Spor o tom, byl li udar Gitlera po SSSR uprezhdaiushchim, davno reshen', *Nezavisimaia gazeta*, 7 April 1999.

we did not sign this document, and we decided as a preliminary step to make a report to Stalin about it.¹

The text of Anfilov's interview was published in 1995, three years after Svetlishin's book, and it differs from it in certain details. Anfilov is a key link to Zhukov, and much depends here on his credibility. In 1965, he was a senior lecturer in military history at the general staff academy. The following year, Anfilov established a reputation for independence with outspoken public criticism of Stalin and other pre-war leaders. In February 1966, there was a discussion at the Institute of Marxism-Leninism, at which Anfilov condemned Voroshilov and Marshal Budennyi for their part in the Red Army purges of 1937-8 ('It makes me sick, at parades, when I see Voroshilov at the tribune'). More to the point, Anfilov made outspoken criticisms of Stalin, and in the cautious new historical climate of the Leonid Brezhnev era this cost him a promising mainstream military career. Nevertheless, Anfilov was able to continue as an historian and scholar, and he would produce some of the most important studies of 1941.²

The third account concerned Timoshenko. The people's commissar of defence in 1941 was less forthcoming than many other wartime leaders. His career had been blighted by the disastrous Battle of Khar'kov in early 1942. He did not write memoirs or even grant interviews, although he was officially on active service until 1960 (he died in March 1970). 'I have not been able to talk to Timoshenko,' Anfilov told the meeting in 1966; 'he speaks to nobody.'³ Nevertheless, Timoshenko did speak informally and frankly in the 1960s to one comrade, N. G. Liashchenko, and in this conversation confirmed that the May 1941 war plan had been put to Stalin. As with the Anfilov account, this version has a meeting between Timoshenko and Stalin, but Liashchenko also mentioned the presence of politburo members.⁴ It is the most colourful version, as we shall see. Although third-hand, the intermediaries are substantial figures. Liashchenko, born in 1910, served as a division commander in the Second World War; in the 1960s, he was a General of the Army, commander of an MD, and a candidate member of the party central committee.⁵ Liashchenko's account comes to us through Bezymenskii, one of the leading Russian writers on the Second World War, an editor of the current affairs journal *Novoe vremia*, and a professor in the academy of military science.

To sum up, there are at least three second-hand accounts, based initially on the oral evidence of Zhukov and Timoshenko, which indicate that the May 1941 war plan was put to Stalin. Anfilov, Bezy-

¹ Anfilov, 'Razgovor', p. 40.

² Anfilov, 'Novaia versiia'; V. Petrov, 'June 22, 1941': *Soviet Historians and the German Invasion* (Columbia, SC, 1968), p. 252. Anfilov died in 2002; for an obituary, see A. S. Orlov et al., 'Viktor Aleksandrovich Anfilov', *NNI* (2002, no. 5), pp. 253-5.

³ Petrov, *June 22*, p. 253.

⁴ Bezymenskii, 'O plane', pp. 61-2 n. 27, citing notes of the author's conversation with Liashchenko.

⁵ 'Liashchenko, Nikolai Grigorevich', *Sovetskaia voennaia entsiklopediia* (Moscow, 1978), v. 63.

menskii, and Svetlishin are specialists with scholarly credentials and good contacts. There is no plausible reason why Zhukov and Timoshenko (or Liashchenko) should have made up the story about the presentation to Stalin of the May 1941 war plan. It is, then, unconvincing to argue that Stalin never saw the May war plan, or that it never left the walls of the general staff building. The most likely time for the war plan to have been discussed with Stalin is the evening of 19 May 1941. According to Stalin's appointment diary Timoshenko, Zhukov, and Vatutin were alone with Stalin and Molotov for over an hour, which is the first recorded meeting of Timoshenko and Zhukov with Stalin after the document was completed (assuming it was completed on 15 May).¹ If Stalin had been given the plan immediately after it was drafted, it is hard to think how he would *not* have discussed it at this first meeting with Zhukov and Timoshenko; the presence of Vatutin, the other key planner, was also significant.

If Stalin was aware of the plan, did he *initiate* it? The May plan was evidently drafted immediately after Stalin's speeches in the Kremlin on 5 May to the graduates of various Red Army academies, an event which the military and political leadership of the Soviet Union attended. Anfilov's account of his interview with Zhukov has Zhukov confirming the importance of Stalin's speeches: 'The idea to pre-empt the German attack came to Timoshenko and me in connection with Stalin's speech of 5 May 1941 ... in which he spoke of the possibility of an offensive mode of action [*o vozmozhnosti' deistvovat' nastupatel'nyim obrazom*]. This speech, in the circumstances of the enemy concentration of forces on our borders, convinced us of the need to work out a directive involving a pre-emptive attack.' A reference to Stalin's 5 May speech is also made in Timoshenko's account (see below).²

Stalin did indeed refer to the doctrine of the offensive in his speeches of 5 May (the full details of which were not made public at that time, and not even until the 1990s). His main speech of 5 May concerned the strength of the Red Army and the need not to overrate the German armed forces. He also, however, blamed the defeat of the French in 1940 on their passive Maginot Line strategy. He was more outspoken in shorter speeches (toasts) at the reception that followed the graduation ceremony. When a general proposed a toast to the 'Stalinist foreign policy of peace', Stalin corrected him:

The policy of peace secured peace for our country. The policy of peace is a good thing. We have up to now, up to this time, carried out a line [based on] defence – up until the time when we have re-equipped our army, up until the time we have supplied the army with the modern means of battle. And now, when our army has been reconstructed, has been amply supplied [*nasytiti*] with equipment for modern battle, when we have become stronger, now it is neces-

¹ Korotkov, 'Posetiteli', pp. 47–8.

² Anfilov, *Razgovor*, p. 41; Bezymenskii, 'Plan', pp. 61–2 n. 27.

sary to go from defence to offense [*ot oborony k nastupleniiu*]. Defending our country, we must act offensively. From defence to go to a military doctrine of offensive actions. We must transform our training, our propaganda, our agitation, our press in an offensive spirit. The Red Army is a modern army, and a modern army is an offensive army.¹

It would be naive to accept a sequence of events in which Stalin made his 5 May speech, completely changing Timoshenko and Zhukov's outlook, after which they withdrew to their headquarters to draft a response which they suddenly presented to Stalin two weeks later. First of all, pre-war Soviet war plans, including those of September 1940 and March 1941, had involved 'an offensive mode of action' (as indeed had Red Army strategy since the Civil War). Zhukov's presentation to the December 1940 high command conference had been about the 'offensive mode of action'.

Moreover, much of importance happened between the 5 May speech and the completion of the May war plan on the 15th. As Timoshenko and Zhukov were working on the May war plan and ordering certain military preparations (see below), on the other side of the Kremlin Communist Party officials were redrafting propaganda documents, both for the army and for the population in general. The draft directives amplified and elaborated Stalin's words of 5 May. V. A. Nevezhin has attempted to argue, on the basis of extensive research in the central party archives, that an 'offensive war slogan' (*lozung nastupatel'noi voiny*) dominated propaganda preparations after 5 May. He has certainly demonstrated that this was an elaborate process which directly involved A. A. Zhdanov and A. S. Shcherbakov, who were central committee (CC) secretaries. The secretariat of the CC was the core administrative organ of the Communist Party: there were only five CC secretaries, and all were full or candidate members of the politburo; Stalin was a secretary (more accurately, general secretary). In other words, this process was taking place at the highest level and involved officials in day-to-day contact with Stalin.²

Conferences were held on 8-9 May in the CC secretariat, with the editors of the major newspapers and journals and with those responsible for the TASS news agency. Even more significant, there was a meeting of the main military council on 14 May where Timoshenko, Zhukov, and other senior Red Army commanders and commissars met with Zhdanov, who was a co-ordinator of the propaganda campaign. This main military council meeting took place as Timoshenko and Zhukov were putting the finishing touches to the May war plan. The meeting on 14 May seems to have been in the spirit of the new 'line' put forward in Stalin's speeches of 5 May. After his report to this meeting, Army Commissar 1st Class A. I. Zaporozhets, head of the

1 Stalin, speech of 5 May 1941, *Istoricheskii arkhiv* (1995, no. 2), pp. 26-31.

2 Nevezhin, *Sindrom*, pp. 186-251.

main administration of political propaganda of the Red Army (GUPPKA), was ordered immediately to begin work on a draft directive on army propaganda.¹

Two draft propaganda directives were eventually prepared (and it is important to remember that these were *drafts*). The one for civilian party organizations was prepared by the propaganda and agitation administration (UPA) of the central committee and entitled 'On the Current Tasks of Propaganda'. The directive for the military, 'On the Tasks of the Political Propaganda in the Red Army in the Immediate Period', was prepared by GUPPKA. Both covered almost exactly the same ground as Stalin's 5 May speeches, and, although drafted by different agencies, they shared a key core: '[The] new conditions under which the country is living demand of party organizations a fundamental change in party-political work in the Bolshevik indoctrination of the personnel of the Red Army, and of the whole Soviet people, in the spirit of burning patriotism, revolutionary decisiveness, and constant readiness to go over to a crushing offensive against the enemy.' (The passage in the army document is nearly identical, and presumably was based on the civilian document.)² The draft civilian directive explained the 'new conditions': Soviet 'military weakness was a thing of the past,' and the Soviet Union could now fulfil Lenin's teaching that 'the land of socialism ... must take on itself the initiative of offensive military actions against the capitalist encirclement with the objective of widening the front of socialism.' In addition, 'the international situation has become extremely critical, [and] military danger for our country is approaching as never before. Under these conditions the Leninist slogan "defend our land on the land of others [*na chuzhoi zemle zashchishchat' svoiu zemliu*]" may at any moment be transformed into practical action.'³

There were also important measures being taken by the Red Army in these critical days between 5 and 15 May, and these must have had Stalin's approval. Stalin remained, it should be stressed, in close contact with the high command: Timoshenko and Zhukov had nearly two hours alone with Stalin and Molotov on the evening of 10 May, and the two officers also met Stalin for ninety minutes on the 12th, and again for two hours on 14-15 May (after the main military council). Perhaps significantly, the midnight meeting on 14-15 May was also attended by one other official, Lazar' Kaganovich, politburo member and people's commissar for transport (NKPS). This should be seen in light of the third request in the May war plan (completed on the following day): 'to demand of the NKPS the full and timely completion

1 Nevezhin, *Sindrom*, pp. 186-251.

2 Draft CC directive, c.28 May 1941, 'Dve direktivy 1941 g. o propagandistskoi podgotovke SSSR k voine', ed. V. A. Nevezhin, *Arkheograficheskii ezhegodnik za 1995 god*, p. 200; Draft GUPPKA directive, c.9 June 1941, *ibid.*, p. 203.

3 Draft CC directive, c.28 May 1941, *ibid.*, p. 200.

of railway construction according to the plan for [19]41'.¹ On 13 May, the general staff ordered the movement of four armies (16th, 19th, 21st, and 22nd Armies) from the interior to Western and Kiev MDs; their strength totalled twenty-eight rifle divisions.² This comprised the high command reserve, which would feature in the May war plan ('to carry out a hidden concentration of forces nearer to the western frontier, in the first instance to concentrate all armies of the high command reserve'). A document of 13 June listed three of these armies as being part of the high command reserve (RGK): 16th and 19th Armies were intended for the Southwestern Army Group, and 22nd Army for Western Army Group; 21st Army was already listed as attached to the Kiev MD.³

Also, very soon after 5 May, Timoshenko and Zhukov were allowed to take the initiative of ordering that 'covering plans' be prepared by the frontier MDs, which were to be ready within a week or two (depending on the MD). The most likely date for sending these orders out was, significantly, 14 May. Preparation of the covering plans can be seen as a reaction to the German troop build-up, but bolstering the border defences was an essential first stage in the implementation of an *offensive* war plan. The mobilization and deployment of the main Red Army striking force had to be covered, and it was also necessary to prepare those sectors of the front – the future Northwestern and Western Army Groups – that would be on the defensive as the attack of Southwestern Army Group began. The May war plan would request precisely this preliminary step: 'to organize a firm defence and a covering of the state border, using for this all forces of the border [military] districts and nearly all aviation which has been assigned for deployment in the West'; indeed, these plans were to be drawn up by 1 June.⁴

Two weeks after the 5 May 1941 speech, and very shortly after the main military council meeting of 14 May, Stalin seems to have changed the pace of the preparations. Our knowledge of what happened is, once again, based on third-hand accounts: Anfifov found no documents in the archives about Stalin's reaction, but states that Zhukov told him the following:

On 15 May, [Vasilevskii] delivered the draft of the directive to the people's commissar [Timoshenko] and me. However, we did not sign this document, and we decided as a preliminary step to make a report to Stalin about it. He immediately exploded when he heard about the pre-emptive blow

¹ Korotkov, 'Posetiteli', p. 47; Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 45.

² Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, i. 345.

³ Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 43; Vatutin, Report on Deployment, 13 June 1941, 1941 god, ii. 359–60.

⁴ Some of the covering plans and responses were published in several numbers of *Voenno-istoricheskii zhurnal* in 1996; see Iu. A. Gor'kov and Iu. N. Semin, 'Konets global'noi lzhii', *VIZh* (1996, nos. 2, 3, 4, 5, 6); Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 44.

[*predupreditel'nyi udar*] against the German forces. 'Have you gone mad? Do you want to provoke the Germans?', he barked out irritably. We referred to the situation that had developed on the borders of the USSR, and to the ideas contained in his speech of 5 May ... 'I said that in order to encourage the people there, so that they would think about victory and not about the invincibility of the German army, which is what the world's press is blaring on about,' growled Stalin. And thus was buried our idea for a pre-emptive blow.¹

The version that Liashchenko passed on to Bezymenskii, based on his talks with Timoshenko, was even more dramatic. According to this, Zhukov lost his composure and had to be removed to another room when Stalin shouted at him and accused him of being a warmonger. Stalin then turned on Timoshenko with the same charges. Timoshenko cited Stalin's speech, to which Stalin allegedly replied, addressing those at the meeting, 'Look everyone [...] Timoshenko is healthy and has a large head, but his brain is evidently tiny ... What I said [on 5 May] was for the people, their vigilance had to be raised, and you must understand that Germany will never on its own move to attack Russia [...] If you provoke the Germans on the border, if you move forces without our permission, then bear in mind that heads will roll.' Stalin then left, slamming the door.² In Svetlishin's rather different version, published before Anfilov's account, Zhukov sent [*vruchil*] the war plan to Stalin via A. N. Poskrebyshv, Stalin's powerful personal assistant, and was summoned the following day by Poskrebyshv:

Stalin was very angry with my [Zhukov's] report, and he [Poskrebyshv] was instructed to inform me that I was to write no further memoranda directly [to Stalin]; the chairman of the council of ministers [i.e., Stalin] was better informed about our long-term relations with Germany than the chief of the general staff, [and] the Soviet Union still had enough time to prepare for the decisive battle with fascism. Carrying out my proposal would only benefit the enemies of Soviet power.³

Is it possible, on the other hand, that Stalin not only saw (and instigated) the May 1941 war plan but that he *accepted* the plan and ordered that it should be put into operation immediately? The revisionists claim that, as of 22 June, the Soviet Union was actually planning to attack Germany, perhaps in July 1941. Mel'tiukhov, who has worked extensively in the military archives, argues that the Soviet attack was originally set for 12 June 1941, then postponed because of the diplomatic uncertainty following the flight of Rudolf Hess to Scotland. This was Stalin's 'missed chance' (*upushchenyi shans*) in the title of his book published in 2000. Based on the rate of concentration of the first echelon armies, Mel'tiukhov concludes that the date was

¹ Anfilov, *Razgovor*, p. 41.

² Bezymenskii, 'Plan', pp. 61-2 n. 27.

³ Svetlishin, *Krutye stupeni*, pp. 57-8.

then re-set for 15 July or shortly after it. Bobylev also believes that a decision was made to go to war, and that a mid-July date was the most likely. Rezun-Suvorov states that the day of the beginning of general mobilization (*Den' 'M'*) would have been Sunday, 6 July.¹

Timoshenko and Zhukov were not, after all, dismissed for being 'warmongers'. Both Mel'tiukhov and Bobylev have pointed out that the desiderata of the 15 May war plan were in the process of being fulfilled, a process which began before the May war plan was presented, and which continued in late May.² On 24 May, there was a large and important meeting of senior military leaders with Stalin, about which detailed records have not yet been produced. Present were Timoshenko, Zhukov, Vatutin, the head of the air force, the commanders and commissars of the Leningrad MD and the four border MDs, and the commanders of the air forces of the Western and Kiev MDs. There was apparently no comparable meeting, combining the central and field military leaders, at any other date in the first half of 1941. It is striking that this meeting has never been dealt with by 'official' Russian military historians, and it remains one of the major mysteries of the pre-*Barbarossa* period. Some revisionist historians have, not unreasonably, read much into the absence of any discussion: had the participants simply considered the German threat and measures to strengthen Soviet defences, this meeting would surely have been used later as evidence of the foresight and professional competence of the Red Army's leaders.³

It does, on balance, seem unlikely that Stalin gave the go-ahead for the immediate implementation of the May plan. The memoir evidence cited above must carry considerable weight, and military measures that would have been essential for the lead-up to a 'sudden blow' were not carried out. Above all, there was no full-scale hidden mobilization; concentration of forces was going on, but not at a pace that would allow an early attack. Table 1 gives both the forces specified in the May plan, those initially available, and those that, according to Vatutin and Zhukov, had become available by the middle of June. Vatutin's figures would appear to indicate what forces would be available if war began immediately. Under the May plan, the Southwestern Army Group was to have 122 divisions, but even in mid-June, in the eight armies of Southwestern Army Group and in one army on the left flank of Western Army Group, the total strength available was still at most 84 divisions. Vatutin added to this 20 rifle divisions which were physically in the Volga, Khar'kov, and Orel MDs. His figures suggest where the final elements of the striking force would have come from: there were

¹ Mel'tiukhov, *Shans*, pp. 290, 411-12, 509; Bobylev, 'Tochku', pp. 51-8; Suvorov, *Icebreaker*, pp. 344ff.; V. Suvorov, *Ledokol. Den' 'M'* (Moscow, 1997), pp. 560, 566-7.

² Strategic Deployment Plan, May 1941, p. 45, Mel'tiukhov, *Shans*, pp. 408-10; Bobylev, 'Tochku', p. 51.

³ Korotkov, 'Posetiteli', p. 48; Bobylev, 'Tochku', pp. 52ff.; Mel'tiukhov, *Shans*, pp. 377.

23 divisions in the two high command reserve (RGK) armies (16th and 19th), which were deploying behind Southwestern Army Group, and a further 11 divisions were in 24th Army, one of the 'Central Armies' of the RGK, and which was forming south-west of Moscow. Together with the forces on the frontier, these made for a total of 138 divisions. According to Vatutin a further 17 divisions would be available 'for the west' (for either Western Army Group or Southwestern Army Group) 'under favourable conditions'.¹ According to the May plan, the concentrated force of the whole Red Army in the West was to number 196 divisions. On 22 June, Soviet forces in the first and second strategic echelons numbered only 108 divisions: 56 rifle and cavalry divisions on the western frontier and 52 divisions (including 24 tank and 12 motorized divisions) at a distance of 60-250 miles from the frontier. Many of these divisions were under-strength in personnel and equipment. Another sense of the shortfall is that, under MP-41, the Western MDs should have had 6.5 million personnel; on 22 June, they numbered about three million.²

A number of other measures would have been expected. No wartime headquarters was created, and there was no Soviet air reconnaissance over those German airfields and lines of communication which would have been the first targets of a Soviet 'sudden blow ... from the air'. Implementation would also have involved making the plan known beyond a very small inner circle, and the drafting and distribution of detailed orders; such activity would have left traces in archives or memoirs, or would have been discovered by the German invaders. Fifteen years later, Zhukov stated that on 22 June 'the general staff did not have operational and mobilization plans which had been completed and approved by the Government'.³ As for the propaganda campaign, the 'offensive war' directives were only composed in draft form four or five weeks after Stalin's 5 May speeches, and they had still not been approved three or four weeks later, on 22 June.

This is not the place to go in depth into the subject of Stalin's perceptions and intentions. Molotov correctly urged caution on this subject, while criticizing Vasilevskii's memoirs: "Stalin believed this, Stalin thought that." As if anyone knew what Stalin thought about the war.⁴ My working hypothesis, and it cannot be more than a hypothesis, is that Stalin did not want war with Germany in the summer of 1941, did not see it as the most likely event (or at least did not see it as unavoidable), but did not necessarily fear it either. He did not *expect* it, but this was not because he naively trusted Nazi Germany, not because he awaited an ultimatum, and not because he mistook German military preparations for diplomatic pressure. Above all, Stalin assumed

¹ Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, i. 367; Vatutin, Report on Deployment, 13 June 1941, *1941 god*, ii. 358-61.

² Zolotarev, *Velikaia otechestvennaia*, i. 122; Gareev, *Stranitsy*, p. 127.

³ Zhukov, draft speech of May 1956, *Zhukov*, p. 138.

⁴ Chuev, *140 besed*, p. 42.

Germany would not act until after the British Empire had been defeated or forced to make peace. This was consistent with Stalin's understanding of the history of the First World War, with the intelligence reports he was receiving about German intentions, and with what those reports were telling him about the deployment of the *Wehrmacht*. He did not *want* war in the summer of 1941 because the Soviet armed forces were in the middle of huge re-equipment, fortification, and training programmes and would be much more ready for war in 1942 than in 1941. Time was on the side of the Soviet Union.

Stalin did not, I would argue, *fear* war in the summer of 1941 because the Soviet Union possessed very powerful, if imperfect, armed forces. From Stalin's point of view, if war broke out in 1941 it would be more difficult than a war in 1942, but not a disaster. Although Glantz and Gorodetsky have stressed Stalin's sense of the weakness of his armed forces, they are both arguing from hindsight, from knowledge of what actually happened after 22 June. The basic argument of Glantz's *Stumbling Colossus* is that the Red Army was in a disorganized state, therefore Stalin could not possibly have been thinking of a pre-emptive attack. Gorodetsky talks of the 'bankruptcy of the [Soviet] military', and claims that this was why Stalin was frantic to make an accommodation with Hitler. Both historians are right about the actual flaws of the Red Army, but unconvincing in their argument that Stalin – or the generals – saw those flaws before 22 June 1941.

Roberts takes a different line and portrays a Stalin desperate to believe in the power of the Red Army, even in its ability to carry out successful offensive operations. There is an inconsistency in Roberts's argument; she also argues that Stalin's confidence in the Red Army was shaken by the Winter War, and she tends to make Stalin more cautious than his generals. Courageously, she attempts to draw a nuanced picture of the Soviet military-political system, but she depicts Soviet military doctrine as some kind of elemental force beyond Stalin's control, and with which he was swept along. I would argue that there was little difference between the perceptions of Stalin and the generals until perhaps the last months before June 1941.¹ Stalin himself gave a bullish assessment of the Winter War in a speech to an April 1940 conference: 'We did not just beat the Finns – that was not such a big thing. The main thing about our victory was that we defeated the technology, tactics, and strategy of the leading states of Europe, whose representatives were the Finns' instructors.' Interestingly, according to Stalin one of the reasons the Finns lost was that they had a defensive doctrine: 'An army that is trained not for the offensive but for passive defence ... I cannot call such an army an army.' A year later, in his famous 5 May 1941 speech, Stalin told the graduating cadets that 'real experience in the restructuring of our army we

¹ Roberts, 'Planning', pp. 1295, 1320; 'Oshibki', pp. 229–31.

drew from the Russo-Finnish War and from the current war in the West.¹

Stalin was prepared to plan 'realistically' for contingencies, and even to sanction covert preparation for war. Soviet-German relations might worsen or operations in the West might so entangle the *Wehrmacht* that a Soviet-initiated offensive would be possible. (There is, however, very little in the Soviet war plans about the implications of a German invasion of Britain, which would have tied down or weakened the bulk of the *Luftwaffe* as well as at least a part of the German army.) Stalin did not disagree with the overall doctrine and deployment of the Red Army and was genuinely an advocate of offensive warfare: if relations with Nazi Germany were to break down irretrievably, he apparently had no qualms about the May document's 'plan of intended military actions', the offensive into southern Poland.

After the war broke out, Stalin would explain much of the early 'German-Fascist' success by prior mobilization: 'the German forces ... were already fully mobilized and the 170 divisions ... moved up to the frontiers of the USSR were in a state of complete readiness, awaiting only a signal to act, while Soviet forces still had to be mobilized and moved up to the borders.'² Six weeks earlier, however, 'hidden mobilization and hidden concentration' may have been the sticking point for Stalin when he considered the May war plan. The essence of that plan, despite many ambiguities, was arguably an attempt by the Red Army high command to secure Stalin's agreement to immediate mobilization, but this he was not prepared to give. Vasilevskii stated that 'it was known to responsible workers of the general staff that ... Timoshenko on several occasions in May and June 1941 made requests to I. V. Stalin about the necessity of carrying out the immediate general mobilization of the country, or of the mobilization of even those forces which were designated in the operational plan for deployment along our western borders, but permission for this was not received.'³ A hidden mobilization of the scale required to make the 'sudden blow' into Poland a practical possibility meant calling up millions of men, hundreds of thousands of horses, and tens of thousands of vehicles; general mobilization meant increasing the strength of the Red Army to a total of 8,700,000 men. Forward movement of divisions up to their staging points would obviously have been very hard to conceal. Stalin must have believed that if the Germans learned about large-scale mobilization and concentration, they would go to war. This was a point emphasized by his military mentor Shaposhnikov in his major theoretical

1 Stalin, speech of 17 April 1940, *Zimniaia voina 1939-40*, ed. E. N. Kul'kov and O. A. Rzheshesvskii (Moscow, 1998), ii. 282; Stalin, speech of 5 May 1941, *Istoricheskii arkhiv* (1995, no. 2), p. 26. The Winter War did involve appalling Russian losses, but the Red Army won a decisive victory in the Karelian Isthmus, and it won it under difficult weather conditions.

2 Radio address, 3 July 1941, *1941 god*, ii. 449.

3 Vasilevskii, 'Nakanune', p. 10.

work of the 1920s, and based on the Russian experience of the outbreak of the First World War: 'Mobilization is war,' Shaposhnikov wrote, 'and we cannot understand it in any other way.'¹ This would be even more true in dealing with the apparently unstable power structure of the Third Reich. Timoshenko and Zhukov were looking only at a military solution, which began with mobilization. For Stalin, however, mobilization would effectively close all other options, and it was better to wait. The Germans might be causing concern, but they had not yet concentrated the bulk of their forces in the East. Stalin preferred, for the moment, to use diplomatic and economic means to contain the Nazi threat.

The same reasoning may well have applied to propaganda planning, as implementation of the propaganda directives would have been the political equivalent of a Red Army general mobilization. The draft civilian directive made clear what would have been involved: 'all means of propaganda and agitation – newspapers and magazines, brochures and books, lectures and reports, meetings of the toilers and discussions', were to be subordinated to the 'all-important task' of inculcating 'the militant offensive spirit of the Red Army and of the whole Soviet people'.² Such a propaganda campaign could only have led to a drastic worsening of relations with Germany, and indeed would have provoked a German attack.

Stalin's reasoning, at least to me, is understandable. Less clear is the reasoning and behaviour of generals like Timoshenko, Zhukov, Vatu-tin, and Vasilevskii, a phenomenon first brought out in the West by Roberts.³ The generals – and not Stalin – proposed ambitious offensive preparations, notably in the September 1940 and March and May 1941 war plans, the last of which included a pre-emptive surprise attack. Of course, at one level these officers were right: against Hitler there could only be a military solution. Unfortunately, the Red Army high command did not have a *realistic* military solution: they advocated general mobilization when that measure, even while 'hidden', would run a strong risk of leading to war with Germany. The generals should also have been more aware than Stalin of the Red Army's weaknesses. Many shortcomings *did* become obvious after the Soviet-Finnish War, and they had been elaborated in the Voroshilov/Timoshenko hand-over documents (*Akt priema*). It might be argued that Timoshenko and Zhukov only put forward the May 1941 war plan when they suddenly learned (on 5 May) of Stalin's change of 'line' to an offensive strategy. Going against this, however, is the fact that Soviet military doctrine

¹ B. M. Shaposhnikov, *Vospominaniia. Voenna-nauchnye trudy* (Moscow, 1974), p. 558 (from *Mosg armii*).

² Draft CC directive, c.28 May 1941, Nevezhin, 'Dve direktivy', p. 202.

³ This is one of the main themes of Roberts, 'Planning'. Roberts is more concerned, however, about the technical shortsightedness of the military planners, than about the diplomatic implications of mobilization and concentration.

had long been offensively minded, and the May 1941 war plan was only a variant of the Red Army's earlier plans. Bezymenskii suggested a different explanation, that for Zhukov the purpose of the May war plan was to make Stalin see the seriousness of the situation, to get some kind of response to the German threat.¹ Such an interpretation seems too charitable.

The generals do seem to have believed that the Red Army could feasibly go to war against Germany, with an offensive strategy using existing resources but after a considerable period of preparation. From their point of view, this would not be ideal, but it would keep the Germans from gaining the initiative. The generals were aware of the great size of the Red Army in terms of personnel and equipment, and possibly saw the Soviet-Finnish war as indicative of the power, rather than the weakness, of the Red Army. An example of this wishful thinking was Voroshilov's speech to a CC plenum in March 1940: 'Our army achieved this victory in a short time because the shortcomings in military preparations and in the work of the war department [*Voennogo Vedomstva*] that were hidden at the start of the war were in the main liquidated at the instructions of and under the leadership of com. Stalin ... in the course of the war itself.' It was the 'victors' of the Winter War – notably Timoshenko and Meretskov – who led the Red Army in 1940. The generals may also have believed that adequate reforms had been implemented in the year which followed the war: this was Zhukov's view, in the opinion of one of his biographers.² As for the May version of the war plan, with the 'sudden blow', the generals were also probably more pessimistic than Stalin about the likelihood of a German attack. If Russia was going to have to fight anyway, then it was best to seize the initiative.

Stalin's near-fatal cadres policy, going back to the purges of 1937-8 (and perhaps to the less-known ones of 1930-1), had thrown up a supreme military leadership which, at the time, was inexperienced or incompetent. The surviving military *vydvizhentsy*, the men who were 'moved up' to the top of the Red Army ground forces, were, almost without exception, former enlisted men in their mid-forties. The situation was even worse in the Red Army air force, where young combat veterans from Spain or China were given command posts for which they were poorly prepared: for example, Lieutenant General P. V. Rychagov, the overall commander of the Red Army air force in the first months of 1941, was only thirty years old. All these commanders had been educated and socialized in a military system which exaggerated

¹ Bezymenskii, 'Plan', pp. 64-5.

² Voroshilov, speech of 28 March 1940, *Tainy i uroki zimnei voyny. 1939-1940*, ed. N. L. Volkovskii et al. (St Petersburg, 2000), p. 445; B. Sokolov, *Neizvestnyi Zhukov: Portret bez retushi* (Minsk, 2000), pp. 222-3; lessons of the Winter War are also discussed in V. A. Anfilov, 'Korennaiia perestroika obucheniia i vospitaniia v Krasnoi Armii posle sovetsko-finliandskoi voyny', *VIZh* (2001, no. 1), pp. 26-36, and C. van Dyke, *The Soviet Invasion of Finland, 1939-40* (London, 1997), pp. 189-220.

the role of the offensive. Meanwhile, extreme concentration of power in Stalin's hands, and frequent changes of leadership, meant that calculations of mobilization capacity and operational planning were confused, disjointed, and unrealistic.

The individuals who made the military proposals had many shortcomings. Timoshenko (more than Zhukov) was the key figure, as he led the people's commissariat of defence across the period when the September 1940, March 1941, and May 1941 plans were drawn up. His serious limitations as a leader and planner would become apparent in the late summer of 1941 in the central part of the front, and in 1942 at Khar'kov. Zhukov and Vasilevskii, who would turn out to be two of the half dozen outstanding military leaders and planners of the Second World War, on either side, were, in 1941, inexperienced and relatively youthful officers who, in any other major army, would have been nowhere near high command. 'It must be said', admitted Zhukov in an unpublished memoir written after the war, 'that neither the people's commissar [Timoshenko] nor I had the necessary experience in the preparation of the armed forces for the kind of war that broke out in 1941. The experience of conducting war on such a scale ... we gained later – in the course of the war.'¹

Zhukov, the third chief of staff in six months, had not served on the general staff before and was temperamentally unsuited to the job. According to his memoirs, he tried to turn down the January 1941 appointment: 'I have never worked in staffs,' he told Stalin. 'I have always been a line officer. I cannot be chief of the general staff.' This was not false modesty; in a testimonial written ten years earlier (1930), Zhukov's superior had written positively about his will and decisiveness but made a significant reservation: 'May be usefully employed as a deputy division commander or commander of a mechanized unit ... Cannot be assigned to staff and teaching work, he fundamentally hates it.'² Zhukov was an energetic young commander who had shown ruthless ability in an extraordinary battle fought over long supply lines on the remote border of Mongolia. On the other hand, the defeat of the green Japanese 23rd Division at Khalkin Gol in the summer of 1939 hardly gave Zhukov adequate experience for preparing a huge European army for battle against the *Wehrmacht*. In a conversation in 1968 with the writer Konstantin Simonov, Zhukov admitted as much: 'Before my [January 1941] appointment I did not have experience of staff work and at the beginning of the war, by my own reckoning, I was not a sufficiently experienced and prepared chief of the general staff, leaving aside the fact that I was inherently drawn not to staff but to command work.' Several years earlier, Zhukov had admitted specific shortcomings in co-ordinating front and rear, something which would

¹ Zhukov, unpublished memoir, 1941 god, ii, 501.

² Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, i, 296; Sokolov, *Zhukov*, p. 202.

have been crucial for the massive operations which the 1941 war plans envisaged:

On the eve of the war, operational co-ordination of the supply and rear services of the people's commissariat [of defence] was concentrated in the general staff. The mobilization and deployment of the rear of the army groups and armies was dealt with by the general staff's plans for mobilization and deployment. Even by the time the war started, not only had I been unable to take control of this most complicated and weighty business, but I was not even able to become familiar with it in the way that I should have.

The administrative structure, regardless of Zhukov's abilities or limitations, was cumbersome and over-centralized; the chief of the general staff was in charge of three subordinate administrations – signals, fuel supply, and air defence – as well as the senior military academies. In any event, in one of his interviews with Anfilov, Zhukov admitted – twenty-five years after the fact – that he had been wrong: 'Now I consider that it was good that [Stalin] did not agree with us at that time [about a pre-emptive attack]. Otherwise, given the state of our forces, there would have been a catastrophe much more massive than our forces suffered near Khar'kov in May 1942.'¹

Vasilevskii was less convinced that the plans he drafted in 1940–1 would not have been feasible. 'The problem', he told Simonov in 1967, 'was not a lack of operational plans, but the impossibility of executing them in the prevailing situation. And it prevailed because Stalin was trying ... by any possible means, to avoid war.' In an unpublished interview given in 1965, Vasilevskii argued that a necessary step to repel the blow of an enemy army of 5,500,000 men was 'the concentration and deployment on the western state border of all the mobilized forces *in accordance with the operational plan* [emphasis added]'. The 'operational plan' – even if we leave aside the May war plan – was essentially that of September 1940 and March 1941, with preparations for an attack into southern Poland. According to Vasilevskii, repelling the enemy blow could be achieved 'only by the main forces of our armed forces under the necessary precondition of their timely [*svoevremennogo*] raising to full combat readiness and complete deployment along our borders before the beginning of the treacherous attack on us by fascist Germany. It was entirely possible for our country to achieve this.'² In 1940–1, however, Vasilevskii had only limited service experience, having commanded an infantry regiment until 1931 and then moving on to staff posts. Zhukov's private comments, written on 6 December 1965 about the text of the second Vasilevskii interview, are interesting, especially in light of his own responsibility for the May 1941 war plan:

¹ K. Simonov, *Glazami cheloveka moego pokoleniia: Razmyshleniia o I. V. Stalin* (Moscow, 1990), p. 308; Zhukov, unpub. memoir, 1941 god, ii. 507 and *Vospominaniia*, i. 305; Anfilov, 'Razgovor', p. 41.

² Simonov, *Glazami*, p. 397; Vasilevskii, 'Nakanune', pp. 9, 11.

A. M. Vasilevskii's explanation does not entirely correspond to reality. I think the Sov[iet] Union would have been quickly defeated if we had deployed all our forces on the frontier on the eve of the war, and the Germans had been able to achieve their existing plan to destroy them in the area of the st[ate] frontier. It is just as well that this did not happen, because if our main forces had been destroyed in the area of the st[ate] border, then Hitler's forces would have had the possibility to fight the war successfully, and Moscow and Lenin-grad would have been taken in 1941.¹

Any damage resulting from a linear defence of the frontier ('deploy[ing] all our forces on the frontier') would have been much smaller than that resulting from an attempt to move forward, to implement the general Soviet war plan for an offensive into southern Poland, including Timoshenko and Zhukov's final 'sudden blow against the enemy, both from the air and on land'. Zhukov, arguably, was admitting as much here, although presumably he was reluctant, even in private correspondence, to speak openly about the offensive war plan.

The May 1941 war plan was inadequate because it did not anticipate the German attack which actually occurred on 22 June. Thinking counter-factually, the May war plan would have been a failure even if the Germans had not attacked in June 1941 and the Red Army had had the chance to launch the first blow in – for the sake of argument – the late summer of 1941. Given the performance actually demonstrated by the Red Army and by the *Wehrmacht* in the months after 22 June, this was no missed opportunity. V. Karpov's 1990 description of a victorious Soviet attack is fanciful; M. I. Mel'tiukhov, a more serious scholar, had no excuse for his far-fetched description of a successful Soviet pre-emptive attack on 12 June.² There was a disastrous mismatch between the ambitious operational objectives of the Red Army and air force and their low level of organizational cohesion, their poor training, and their mix of obsolete and untested equipment. Zhukov's assessments – made after 1941 – are no doubt correct.

Going beyond the counter-factual, even preparation for the offensive envisaged in the September 1940, March 1941, and May 1941 war plans had a most damaging effect on the Red Army's position on 22 June. It led to a mindset which contributed to the Red Army's failure to foresee the actual German attack. It was reflected in a concentration in operational thought and training on attack rather than defence. Zhukov noted this in both published and unpublished memoirs.³ Two aspects were certainly important. First, the Red Army's offensive posture meant deploying forces and supplies as far to the west as possible: mechanized units, airfields, and supply bases had to be situated in for-

¹ Vasilevskii, 'Nakanune', p. 6 (comment by Zhukov).

² V. Karpov, 'Zhukov', *Kommunist vooruzhennykh sil* (1990, no. 5), p. 68; Mel'tiukhov, *Shans*, pp. 502–6. Roberts is also pessimistic about the pre-emptive plan, but she states that at best it 'might have produced somewhat less of a disaster than the Soviet Union suffered in 1941' ('Planning', p. 1321).

³ Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, i. 323; unpublished memoir, 1941 god, ii. 505.

ward locations, able to be used in an attack, but also highly vulnerable to an enemy first strike. A defensive deployment, in contrast, would have prioritized successive lines of defence and a supply base secure in the heart of the country. Second – and this is a point missed by many historians – the offensive orientation was one of the main factors leading to the disastrous deployment of a largest part of the Red Army in the Ukraine, poised to attack southern Poland, rather than in Belorussia.

The pre-war plans also had an influence on the actual reaction of the Soviet high command to the German invasion in the early morning of 22 June 1941. Timoshenko's Directive No. 1 set in train the call-up of men, horses, and vehicles in accordance with MP-41. Then, the 'sudden blow against the enemy, both from the air and on land' was actually ordered. Directive No. 2, sent out to the MD commanders at 07.15, brought into play the Soviet air strikes: 'Bomber and ground-attack aircraft are by means of powerful blows to destroy the aircraft on the enemy's airfields and to destroy by bombing [*razbombit'*] the concentrations of his ground forces. Air strikes are to be carried out to a depth of 60-95 miles.' Tragically, much of the Red Army air force had by this hour been destroyed or immobilized on forward airfields. The Russians had little idea where the enemy attacks were coming from, and the directive had to order reconnaissance aircraft to *find* the *Luftwaffe's* bases, as well as the concentration points of the German army. Directive No. 3, issued fourteen hours later, ordered the Soviet ground forces to carry out a truncated version of the pre-war operational plan:

The armies of the Southwestern Army Group are ... by concentric blows in the general direction of Lublin, using the forces of 5th and 6th Armies [including] no fewer than five mechanized corps and all aviation forces of the army group, to surround and destroy the enemy concentration which is attacking on the front from Vladimir-Volynskii to Krystynopol' [and] by 26 June to take the Lublin area. [Vladimir-Volynskii and Krystynopol' (later Chervonograd) are north of L'vov and between 5th Army and 6th Army.] [These forces] are firmly to secure themselves from the Kraków direction.

Lublin was 55 miles inside German-occupied Poland. The importance still attached to the offensive potential of Southwestern Army Group in these last few hours of unreality was shown by the decision to send the chief of the general staff there, rather than to the Western Army Group. By the morning of 23 June, Zhukov had arrived at Southwestern Army Group headquarters at Tarnopol'.¹

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¹ Timoshenko directive, 22 June 1941, *General'nyi shtab v gody Velikoi Otechestvennoi voyny. Dokumenty i materialy. 1941 god*, ed. V. A. Zolotarev, et al. (Moscow, 1998), RA/VO, xxii (xii[i]), 23; Timoshenko directives, 22 June 1941, *1941 god*, ii. 431, 439-40; Zhukov, *Vospominaniia*, ii. 12-15.

In an interview taped in July 1977, four months before his death, Vasilevskii blamed Stalin's 'line' of avoiding war at all costs:

[Stalin] did not grasp the limit [*predel*] beyond which such a line became not only unnecessary but dangerous. Such a limit should have been correctly determined, the armed forces brought to full combat readiness at the maximum possible speed, accelerated [*forsirovannaia*] mobilization carried out, and the country converted into a single armed camp. While trying to put off armed conflict, whatever hidden work [*skrytnaia rabota*] was possible should have been carried out and completed earlier. There was more than enough evidence that Germany planned a military attack on our country. In our era, aggressive preparations are very difficult [or] practically impossible to hide. *The danger that in the West there would be a hub-bub* [*shum*] *about the supposedly aggressive intentions of the USSR should have been disregarded* [emphasis added]. We had come, due to circumstances beyond our control, to the Rubicon of war, and it was necessary determinedly [*tverdo*] to take a step forward. The interests of our Motherland, of socialism, demanded this.¹

The emphasized sentence is remarkable. There is, of course, no reason why in 1941 the Soviet Union should have been worried about 'hub-bub' in the West. 'Hub-bub' makes sense only from a post-war historiographical perspective, revealing the existence of an offensive war plan in the context of the Cold War of the 1970s. Also extraordinary is the metaphor. Vasilevskii, I would argue, was talking about both a metaphorical Rubicon and a geographical one. In 49 BC, Julius Caesar launched a sudden, secret, pre-emptive offensive campaign across the Rubicon River into the territory of his enemy Pompey. In 1941, the Red Army had to cross the Bug River into southern Poland.

This brings us back to the controversy between traditionalists and revisionists. Did the Red Army in 1940-1 have war plans based on offensive operations? It certainly did, and the deployment of the Red Army was based on such operations. From hindsight, in light of the disaster of June 1941, these plans cast doubts on the strategic sense of the Soviet political leadership and the professional competence at that time of Timoshenko, the people's commissar of defence, and of Shaposhnikov, Meretskov, and Zhukov, successive chiefs of the general staff. Nevertheless, they also require a significant qualification of the traditionalist view of a frightened, inert, and defensive Soviet leadership. Did Timoshenko and Zhukov in May 1941 propose using this offensive war plan in a pre-emptive way, without waiting for the enemy to strike? They did, and this detailed proposal for a 'sudden blow from the air and on land', following a hidden mobilization, reflects even more badly on their professional competence. The proposal did, however, develop out of earlier war plans, it was linked with a number of military and political steps taken that May, and it is possible that it was

¹ Kumanev, *Riadam*, pp. 232-4.

considered seriously by Stalin. Could such an attack plausibly have been mounted as early as June-July 1941, as revisionists like Bobylev, Mel'tiukhov, Rezun-Suvorov, and others suggest? Almost certainly not. Even the immediate implementation of preparations for a pre-emptive attack would have taken months, although the preliminary steps could have begun in the high summer of 1941. The war plan involved mobilizing and assembling very large forces. Did Stalin, Molotov, and the other political leaders actually intend to put this offensive war plan into effect, stage by stage, in 1941? They certainly knew about the May plan, but the answer to the question, based on information currently available, would seem to be no. Stalin was not prepared to escalate tension with Germany by ordering military and political mobilization. He was prepared to stand on the Rubicon but not to cross it, and that ambiguous stance was to have disastrous consequences.

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